MURUGAN—THE TILLER

BY

K. S. VENKATARAMANI

(INDIAN EDITION)

SVETARANYA ASHRAMA.
BRINDABAN STREET, MYLAPORE
MADRAS
1927

BRITISH EDITION

Murugan—The Tiller. Cloth. 7s. 6d.

SIMPKIN, MARSHALL, HAMILTON,
KENT & Co., Ltd.
Stationers' Hall Court, London, E.C. 4.

TO

DR. ANNIE BESANT

THE HUMANITARIAN

All rights reserved.

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	In the Light of Failure	1
II.	Cross-Currents	8
III.	Mixed Motives	14
IV.	The Meeting of Friends	23
V.	A Declamation	28
VI.	Wiving goes by Destiny	31
VII.	An Hour of Dreaming	36
VIII.	The Dust of Life	41
IX.	A River Scene at Alavanti	47
X.	The Lucky Bag Again	54
XI.	Success is Success	63
XII.	The Influence of Monsoons	67
XIII.	The Farewell	70
XIV.	Ramachander—the Camp Clerk of Mr. Cadell	78
XV.	The Evil is in the System	82
XVI.	The Rose without the Thorn	88
XVII.	Prestige is the Spark of Official Life	93
XVIII.	A Curtain Lecture	99
XIX.	The Worm in the Bud	104
XX.	There is a Hidden Justice in the whole Affair	107
XXI.	The River Scene at Alavanti	111
XXII.	A Rebirth	116
XXIII.	Kedari's First Brief	118

CHAP.		PAGE
XXIV.	The Ways of Providence	127
XXV.	A Rare Honour	130
XXVI.	A Country Mouse Visits a Town Rat	138
XXVII.	The Blessings of Government	141
XXVIII.	Friendship is an Even Plank	146
XXIX.	A New Light	153
XXX.	Conflicting Views about a Motor-Car	162
XXXI.	The Wheel of Fortune	167
XXXII.	A Holiday Mood	173
XXXIII.	The River Scene at Alavanti	178
XXXIV.	The Trial Scene at Trichy	185
XXXV.	Desperate Remedies	194
XXXVI.	On the Crest of the Wave	202
XXXVII.	The True Picture	208
XXXVIII.	The Smile of the Farmer	212
XXXIX.	Ramu's New Role	217
XL.	A Little Bar of Sand	227
XLI.	A Dream	237
XLII.	The Last Flicker of the Flame	243
XLIII.	Homely Talk	253
XLIV.	The Moon-lit Night is a Philosopher	257
XLV.	Kedari's Neighbour	267
XLVI.	The Mountain Grass was Rank and Luscious	271
XLVII.	The Vision Splendid	277
XLVIII.	The Red Letter Day	290
XLIX.	The River Scene at Alavanti	296
L.	Murugan—the God-anointed Tiller	301

CHAPTER I

IN THE LIGHT OF FAILURE

THE Cauvery is a majestic river at the village of Alavanti. On the right bank, not far away from the residential quarters, nestled the beautiful little cocoanut garden of Ramachandran. Therein lay the ancestral cottage of Murugan in peace and security for over seven generations. The garden was the most coveted thing in the village and Murugan was the most valued of the hereditary tillers of the soil of Alavanti.

It was an early morning in June and the tropical sun had already begun to pour liberally from a cloudless sky. Murugan regretting that he had overslept the night was hastily yoking the bulls to cart manure for the fields. At the same time he virtuously catalogued to himself in murmurs the details of the work for the day. Ere he could turn round to verify the familiar footsteps he had heard, his master's voice surprised him from a little distance behind.

"Muruga, there is a proverb in English: Misfortune never comes single," floated a soft and sad voice amidst the gentle stir of cocoanut leaves.

"There is also one in Tamil, Swami: The injured toe injures itself again," replied Murugan who was ever anxious for the prestige of his mother-tongue and had a secret contempt for the foreign for reasons of his own.

"Likely, patriotic Muruga," continued Ramachandran in the same pensive voice. "The proverb is now quite true in my case. The Tamil one is even apter. I have failed in the B.A. Examination."

"Failed!" simply echoed Murugan, slackening the rope of the bulls which immediately began to graze innocent of their master's failure, secretly hoping that the day might be declared a holiday in honour of the rare visitor.

"Two years of hard labour and much money spent in vain," continued Ramachandran, "even that doesn't matter. It vexes me not. But this pride of B.A. which I kept as the bull's eye of my ambition and which made me a rebel to my mother—her keenest wishes for my welfare."

"Yes, Swami," Murugan snatched the thread, anxious for the chance to press his own views, "even on her death-bed she deplored but forgave your obstinacy. She wished, as only a mother could wish, to see you married before she died—married within the small ambit of her own pure and chosen clan. It was her only earthly wish after your father's death. She watched you tenderly year by year even as I do the cocoanut seedling grow to a sapling till it flowers and marks its entrance into

bearing age. It was her dying wish as well. She was afraid that, with your strange and foreign views, you might run away one day with——."

"Muruga, deepen not my grief by echoing my mother's words with the deep melody of your own vibrant voice and nature. I know that you hate this education which drains our wealth—the creature of your hard toil. Yes! my mother was alarmed at my wayward ways and free views. Alas! that I inflicted my radical philosophy on her untutored mind and long-ailing body! She was a great and good mother, cultured in her own way—broad and narrow, crude and refined, intelligent and ignorant, symbolising the dual values of a transitional age, but still my mother. Yes, I was an unkind, unsympathetic son—a mere boy——

"But, tell me, Muruga," Ramachandran brushed aside his reverie and asked: "Who put me to an English school, all against our family taste and tradition? Was it that I might learn the Court language and be a little king in my place."

"Your father protested that his only son shouldn't read the foreign tongue lest he utter wrongly the *Sandhya* prayers or pour the funeral oblations with an alien accent or a scientific disdain. You were meant for Sanskrit by your father—and I sided with him. But your mother dressed you as a *Dorai* even from your childhood and wished to see you walk the streets of your native village like the Collector Saheb."

"Well-paid for her ambition!" muttered Ramachandran to himself and cried, "Take back my whole education, Oh, gods! but give me back my mother—even for a day—that I may beg on my knees her forgiveness, that I may go back as a playful child to her lap in this my trying hour of grief for things done and undone. I'm unconsoled and alone in this wide world without friend or foe except you, my trusty Muruga. But how could I share with you all my sorrow—you are but my servant." Ramachandran sobbed like a child.

"Still, you can please your mother, Swami, not by weeping but by acting up to her dying wish." Murugan tried to comfort his master with his plain, rustic words.

"How I swore by B.A. and bandied words with my mother! talked economic theories to her, in return for her unbounded love—I should earn before I married--thwarted her only wish to see me wedded properly before she died. I lectured to her that I should at least be a B.A. ere I called home my wife. And I am now ploughed—nice gods!—only in economics. I spoke in a foreign accent and she understood me not—Muruga, it is really putting new wine into old bottles, though you don't understand the metaphor—" Ramachandran paused a moment in his soliloquy.

"Swami, what is the use of crying over spilled milk. Your mother is watching you from Heaven.

She has charged me with your protection. Still you can redeem—."

Murugan tried to win Swami definitely to his favourite scheme by striking while the iron was hot.

"Muruga, you don't know, my heart is shaking with grief. The B.A. is nothing now. But the failure has turned the light into the darkest cracks and corners of my being. What an unfaithful son I have been to my noble mother! I wrote home for money like a prince—I lived above my means and spent it on coffee clubs and scoundrels—money raised by the sale of her jewels and remitted to me without even a night's delay. If weeping eyes and heart could wash out the sins of my past neglect—I was but a youth and a thoughtless youth, egged on by the crowd of boys in the college to the falsest views of life. Who is not a bluffer in a crowd? But these are strange words for you and words very much above you—."

Ramachandran sobbed for self-comfort. "Swami, I understand the drift. Murugan though unlettered is not a fool. But what is the use of philosophy after a failure or weeping for things after the event? It's like sowing seeds out of season. If Swami would listen to poor Murugan's words, the future is peaceful and clear. Give up the Madras education which has drained our little wealth, and settle down at the village and look after the lands as your forefathers did. Your father and father's

father were lordly and rich with this one *vêli*. Since your father's death these twelve years these fields have never known their master but have lived on as orphans do with but poor Murugan's care."

He paused for breath and to recollect the trend of his thought; then continued, "Marry just the girl whom your mother had in view for you—it's a good alliance, it would please her spirit. Murugan will be as loyal as ever to the salt of seven generations. This one *vêli* will yield double if its lord is here. It's enough to lead a simple and true life. Nay, Swami can even save a little money every year and wipe out the debts incurred for Madras education. So long as Murugan has breath Swami need have no care."

"Muruga, you are right. And you talk like a trusty servant. Your words are wise and they flow clear like a summer spring in the river bed. Ambition is a flooded river which would eat its own banks. Town life is a tempting game and I can never play the king therein but must be a mere pawn."

Ramachandran paused a moment, sweeping his palm over the forehead and said, "My ancestor won this little village as an *Inam*—do you know, Muruga, for what?—for plain living and high thinking, from the royal hands of a Naick King. He was no B.A. but a poor Pandit. I'm eighth of the line and the instinct returns. I'll follow in his wake."

"Swami's words are now to me like the first freshes in the Cauvery filling the heart of the farmer with pride and joy."

"With my mother's death so fresh and near, is it fair, Muruga, for me to marry this year? I'll peacefully settle down in this village and toil with you, sans books, sans coffee club, sans friends, sans teachers, sans cribs—and think of my marriage next year. Muruga, I will surely follow your advice. I've now learnt enough to know that virtue dwells only among the humblest folk of the land."

CHAPTER II

CROSS-CURRENTS

BUT Murugan's sincere words carried comfort only for the day. Ramachandran was profoundly thrown back on himself. Words were like mere drops of water on feather. The causes of his melancholy were deeper. It was a wild regret for the past which he could not recall. The image of his mother stood in his stormed soul as a wrecked ship in the sea would stand for its captain on the shore.

Murugan did his best—but Ramachandran was drooping like one of those tender creepers which would not revive however much Murugan might water them in mid-summer. He could only keep them from dying till Nature's own fertilising rains descended. But the dry wind of failure had scattered the rain-bearing clouds for many a day. Murugan knew it but had the patience and industry of a farmer.

Ramachandran wondered why even his friend had not written to him for three months. Was it the pride of success? No, he was unjust. For, soon

he received a letter. He smiled as he broke it open. He knew well the energetic and bold handwriting of Kedari.

POONAMALLEE HIGH ROAD,
Madras,
3rd July.

DEAR RAMU,

I offer you, tho' late, my sincere condolences on the death of your mother—one of the noblest of mothers—a tribute from one who never knew his own mother. But let not her death make you moody or take you away from the main object of all her sacrifices for you and your education. Our Examination is the biggest lucky bag in the world. Your failure and in Economics, too, is to me a puzzle. Probably you wrote above the head of the examiner. But let us treat these reverses as only for our good. It is no use remaining in the village and appearing for the B. A. as a private candidate. It will destroy the unity and growth of your culture. And you will not enjoy your village life even. You should come over here immediately and strive to redeem your failure by a first class this year.

I have slipped into the Law College, a career close in keeping with my adventure from childhood. I have many an unhappy mood with myself but don't allow them to get the better of me. There is always smoke with fire, but the flame should struggle beyond it. Pray, do start at once.

Otherwise you will do yourself an injury which you can never heal.

I must confess I am also selfish. We have grown into each other so well these four years of our college life. I find it hard to live without you. In fact, I have taken a spacious room for both of us. Pray start at once.

Yours affectionately,

KEDARI.

(P. S.) I hear that the history medal comes to me. You know that it was all a liberal cram of the notes of the professor who was the examiner. But our university honours nothing else. Your original studies in Economics got you not even a pass. The world is ever kind only to the trashy and the adventurous. The meek will never inherit the earth. You must show a little more "go".

KEDARI.

Ramu—we shall call him Ramu hereafter, as Kedari called him affectionately—read this letter over and over again. He missed the gentle note of sympathy which his nature required and he expected. A mere call for action in somewhat military tones on the morrow of his failure slightly wounded his spirit. But it was impossible that his intimate friend was capable of airs so soon. However, his advice was not bad and had a wise ring. And he needed some strong friend to nurse him now.

While Ramu was ruminating in this style, Murugan came in and said, "Swami, sadness like this will do you harm. Come and see the fields to-day. I turned last night the reddish floods from the hills into the *tope nathangal,* the best field in the village. This morning there's an inch of silt which means a splendid crop this year. The whole village is envious of my work and pluck of hand. I didn't take even a wink of sleep yesternight but spade in hand turned the reddish water into the field—."

"Many thanks, Muruga, but we town-bred people know little of these things—" replied Ramu not knowing what to say.

"Come along, Swami and watch me for a while when I plough the field with the fine pair of bulls, how well they toil without yielding to the mire—well worth the money I paid."

He paused a little and then continued, "The green vegetables your mother planted are now yielding in plenty. It will be a nice thing to pluck them with your own hands and carry them home. It will keep you engaged and make your dinner doubly sweet. Nothing like the food that you have gathered with your own hands from your own lands—."

"You say nice things, Muruga, but my mind is sad with other thoughts. Need you preach to me the virtues of simple life? I am a lover of

village. The thing has been in my blood for seven generations.

"But times have somewhat changed now and you can't wipe out the past in a day. Untwisting takes as much time as twisting, Muruga, Is't not so? And I have received a strong letter from my friend and another from my College professor at Madras that I should complete my B.A. Otherwise the whole thing is a waste. Do you not yourself bale buckets of water, Muruga, when the flow in the river ceases and thus save by double effort the perishing crops. Did you not yourself say, Muruga, that mother it was who put me to an English school. Let me satisfy her soul.

"Trusty Muruga, the land is safe in your hands. After all, I know but little of practical agriculture. I must go and complete my studies. I have thought well over it. You must find me the money for it—now one hundred rupees at least. I will take the B.A. degree and then surely settle down here with you and devote my life to the purest and noblest profession of the plough and set an example to younger men. Now, what am I, Muruga, but a well-grown paddy shoot with the ear of corn parched at the throat just at the ripening time. As it is, Muruga, I am only a failure—a subject for others' scorn and pity and a thing which sits heavy on my own mind—."

Murugan heard patiently the long speech, hesitated but sadly and slowly said, "If Swami

has made up his mind, it's n't for poor Murugan to argue but to serve his master's will."

"I shall leave to-morrow, Muruga."

"Swami should see his lands ere he goes."

"What is there to see, Muruga? Seven hundred acres have dwindled to seven within five generations. Even the seven seem so insecure, saddled with debt. The expensive ways of modern life, the fashions and luxuries. Even knowledge, Muruga, carries its own *kist* and cost of cultivation. I am paying for civilisation which keeps my stomach empty. I will see the lands, Muruga, at least to please you, before I go."

When Murugan left, Ramu fell into a reverie. "But for you, dear Kedari, I may never care to complete my B.A. Your company more than my B.A. draws me to Madras. You are for me even as the sea is to the ship or the wind is to the sails. I am feminine. I can't live, self-centred, brooding over my own thoughts, all alone in this wide world. With one true friend, I feel a king's joy. You are more robust—if not so modest. You are cast in a somewhat different mould—like current coin, with a touch of copper in a mass of gold, self-centred and brave, undistressed by sinner or saint but using both like shears, to cut your way through thick and thin. You are meant for something great. I can be of some little use to you, help you to become great, if I go over to Madras now. Dear Kedari, let me be blessed in your growth and success."

CHAPTER III

MIXED MOTIVES

KEDARI was a self-made boy who never knew the softening influences of parental affection or the taming effects of a household. He was born poor in an arid village in the Taluq of Pattukotta. He lost his parents at the early age of five. Nature swiftly turned him into a city lad. He himself was surprised how he managed to slip into the B.A. class in the metropolis of Madras. But on sober reflection he concluded that to the adventurous fellow-man was hospitable and that the world presented certain virtuous and charming aspects. A lively and intrepid young man who has shaped his mind to the environment glided as well on the waters of life as a log of wood dug into a canoe.

If courage was the striking quality of Kedari's mind, a handsome and vigorous expression was the chief feature of his face. He had also plenty of energy for all causes and work. He was primarily a man of action but he often lined it with a prudent idealism. Such happy mingling of qualities naturally resulted in a triple first class in the B.A. at an early age. So far, Kedari kept his head cool

and bathed in the recollections of the past which stimulated a modest behaviour. The triple first class in the B.A. naturally led him into the Law College with the highest credentials, a reputation for modesty, brilliance and wit. He was a favourite of both the professors and the pupils—in fact he was the brightest boy of his college and one of the foremost in Madras. Such was he, the intimate friend of Ramu who was indeed proud of Kedari.

Into the post office of the High Court Buildings, Kedari posted the letter to his friend at Alavanti. Posting it into the letter box, he followed the leaping white envelope with his eye till it disappeared into the dark and responded with a safe bhang at the bottom. Kedari always posted his letters in person bidding the words of farewell, "I'm sure it will do its work." In this case with a little more serious and surer accent, he sent it down the postal pit. For he wrote it in a real mood.

Kedari was dressed unusually well. In fact, it was an amiable comment of his friends that the Law College had effected at least a sartorial change in him. Nor did he dislike the comment. For he had already begun to perceive that fine dress had a fine effect upon the mind of the wearer and induced a distinct respect in the mind of the spectator. He whistled to himself that the philosophy of clothes was well-worth a chapter of essay from the pen of an Indian. He was sure that clothes played an intimate frolic with destiny. He even

regretted that he did not perceive much earlier this intimate connection between cotton stuff and brain matter and the indexing incomparable whiteness common to both. But he soon recovered from this roaming reverie which discovered for him many esoteric points, for a creaking Ford 'bus crashed against a tram post with serious injury only to the mud-guard and a good shake to the human contents which was reckoned in motoring circles a cure for nervous prostration. Kedari was not far away from this scene and took it as a timely reminder that meditations on the road, however valuable, were perilous to the thinker. He edged on to the ill-paved and broken-glass-and-nail-studded margin preferring treading on rough stones and sharp nails to complete destruction or martyrdom gracing only a street accident.

Kedari sailed among the miscellaneous crowd towards Broadway with the ease of motion of a born pedestrian. He did not walk far, when the rickshawallahs, idling at the corner and regretting the increasing discount at which man-power stood in the matter of locomotion, clamourously invited "Swami" for a drive. Kedari had scruples to use a fellow-being for the primary need of motion. But one rickshawallah bolder than the rest and probably more hungry, passively lamented at the top of his voice, "If such rich and respectable people went on foot, Oh God! how could poor rickshawallahs live."

Kedari was saturated in the notions engendered by fine dress. He regretted that he had not, in the tumult of his mind, looked into the mirror ere he left his room just to see how the new coat sat on him. But the voluntary testimony of the rickshawallah to his decent appearance seemed to him a truer mirror than the small and stained one at home. He sincerely rejoiced at the nascent glow of opulence that was evidently settling on him. He glanced at his palm a fleeting wink of scrutiny and nodded assent. The rickshawallah repeated himself, encouraged by the slackening footfalls of Kedari. By way of preserving this nascent growth of respectability and remembering his final destination where dustless feet should convey a charming appeal, Kedari greeted the rickshawallah with the words, "clever fellow, you deserve a silver piece for your smartness."

Kedari sat in the ricksha with one leg firmly riding on the other. His eyelids drooped with love-swept thoughts. The right fingers played the timbrel on the left. A cooing whistle threaded the din and roar of the narrow Broadway traffic. The bloom of youth and success shone on his face, like fresh-gathered jasmine flowers in a silver basket in the market place.

But this vision of beauty was far above the head of the rickshawallah. Kedari was a light weight compared with the usual customers, greasy, corpulent merchant men who added to the natural

weight of fat the compressed weight of cotton. But Kedari was viewed by the ricksha man in another sense as a rich load, a rich load which might well bear a progressive freightage. The long-shanked rickshawallah did his work fleetingly like a race horse and even compared himself breathlessly to the Bombay Mail, when generous masters rode in. On the whole he economised his breath to make up speed and ran silently except for murmuring now and then his glee at the extra remuneration that was his luck for the day. For, he construed Kedari's continued silence into an acquiescence and he knew instinctively more law. Kedari was too much wrapped in his own veil of thoughts to bandy words with his man-horse or mar his first debut into respectability with any raw quarrel or miserliness. Again, he rarely utilised the services of others for his comfort and when he did he paid them liberally. Nor was he in a mood for petty calculations in front of the house of Janaki.

The ricksha glided in and out of the many lanes of Georgetown before it stopped at No. 15, Muthu Mudali Street. Janaki was standing on the open verandah and the mellowed evening light shone upon her with a quiet radiance. Kedari was entranced for a moment and the ricksha glided past the radiant vision. He immediately cried halt—and flung him a rupee, twice the contract rate. He did not care to ask for change in the immediate

presence of Janaki, though originally he had not intended to pay him so much more. The ricksha-wallah never hoped for a rupee even in his wildest comparisons with the Bombay Mail but took in the situation with the trained eye and the keenness of his profession and glided away with profuse thanks to man, god and beast, to his favourite drink shop, smiling pity at his colleagues idly standing at the corners, not so lucky as he for the day.

Everywhere courage pays.

Meanwhile Janaki disappeared within the house to carry to her mother the news of Kedari's arrival. He was a very remote relation of Janaki's. But for unexpected events they would have never known each other in the crowded city of Madras. Meenakshi, the mother of Janaki, heartily welcomed Kedari and offered him a wooden plank which did service for a chair in the only hall which was the drawing room by day and the bed room by night. But Kedari felt enveloped in a joyous mist. Even the squalid surroundings seemed lit with the inner lamp of Janaki's beauty. Janaki herself was coyly standing at the threshold of the kitchen, incidentally keeping back the rolling smoke from the oven which was trying hard to digest a splinter of raw casuarina wood.

Meenakshi never allowed a visitor time to scrutinise the contents of her home but immediately

set the guest floating in the strong current of her conversation.

"Mr. Kedari, you are far too kind to an unfortunate family. I don't know how to thank you. Your visits are indeed sunlight to us. But I fear I am using you over much and bending your kindness a little too often. If only he were alive—Janaki's father——."

"For one of my age, madam, the pleasure of service is the sweetest and the keenest," Kedari replied slowly, with a gentle fire of sincerity and love kindling his face to unexpressed eloquence. "I am too poor to help you with money. But my kind words cost me nothing but may be of some little use to you—words have no money value, thank God, in this city, where every thing, even a twig and a drop of water is priced."

"But a vakil, they say, values only his words and charges poor people so much per word," broke in Janaki with a subdued smile.

"But thank God, I am not yet one. At any rate, I will speak for you, Janaki, without a fee—who will not?—and tutor my apprentice tongue into eloquence over you."

The mother appreciated this little mutual sally of wit and continued the conversation. "Janaki is aging fast and her marriage is imperative this season." And she turned towards Janaki who, finding the topic changing to her own marriage, quietly slipped away but not before throwing a

wistful glance at Kedari who luckily caught its dying graces. His youthful soul rebelled in one tumult of inexpressible joy.

"Mr. Kedari," began Meenakshi after a minute of silence in a businesslike and eager voice, "you know, we have no more than a thousand rupees to spend on Janaki's marriage. We have none to help us except your good self whom Providence has sent as a kindly measure just in the dark hour when Janaki lost her father. When he was alive, I nourished the greatest ambition for her. We stinted ourselves to save money and realise our joy in our daughter's pride and position. For her sake, I drove her father, from his village home to this dire malarial city that he might sweat and earn for dear Janaki's sake. At a time when he was coming up—he would be a Head Clerk now on one hundred, and on such credit I could have raised a loan of three thousand and netted the brightest and richest boy in the Law College as partner for my darling—alas—a dream now."

Kedari tried to check her moving eloquence with a word of assurance, but she continued, "Mr. Kedari, you are powerful and well-known among the boys. You know many. Pray, select one good boy who will take pity upon us and wed Janaki, poor and fatherless, if only for her charms and gentility. Mr. Kedari, you were married only last year, many months before we knew each other.

Treat my daughter as your wife's sister, nay as your own sister."

"Madam, I assure you here and now, I will attend to no work, public or personal, till Janaki's marriage is over. She is as dear to me as my own sister. If there is justice in Heaven, or strength in man's will, I assure her the finest husband. I have already some ideas and just now I have acted upon them. May God help us. I will be here again next Saturday."

CHAPTER IV

THE MEETING OF FRIENDS

KEDARI was indeed glad to welcome Ramu into his room on the day on which he expected him. Nothing distressed him so much as any miscalculations in the real chess-play of life. His robust masculine nature knew only one feminine quality—a morbid sensitiveness to failure. He was happy that his pen was already powerful enough to shape the destiny of men like Ramu—beyond doubt above the average. At first sight there was the old intimate surrender of mutual feelings for a moment. The one was lost in the other, but the moment seemed a final memory, a touch of intimacy that precedes a long farewell.

"This is a nice room, Kedari, overlooking this vast open space. And the railway line that divides the lawn only adds to the picturesqueness. But the rent is rather high for our means—Rs. twenty per month—" Ramu broke the silence of the first few minutes.

"But, Ramu, I have 'black-holed' myself so long in Thambu Chetty Street, I thought I should indeed bid for a change—not that my finances

have improved, but I begin to feel differently and see things from a worldly view-point."

He paused a minute, but Ramu kept silent. So he continued in a somewhat serious note. "Every day the shades of life fall deeper across my way and I begin to think. Ramu, the poor continue to be poor because they make no attempt to live rich. If you don't lift yourself who cares to lift you in this busy world. Start rich, you will go rich and end richer. Self-help is the best help. And I would apply the doctrine pretty far and wide."

Now, Ramu understood the philosophy that moved Kedari to a room of a rental value of Rs. twenty per mensem.

"But——" Ramu tried to protest.

"I know you would, plain and gentle Ramu, dissent. Idealists like you and ignorant men like the masses, keep the rich always rich for ever. The realists get the cream of things while idealists do the preaching by day and night for simplicity and humility and don't get even water to wet the parched tongue or throat. I now see the world much better——."

"From the Law College, Kedari?" said Ramu, "then, now that I have heard its philosophic side, tell me something of your daily life within."

"Daily life within!" echoed Kedari, "The Law College is a little palace-world of its own—its lofty quadrangle and Saracenic structure give it the air and the sensuousness of the pleasure garden of a

nabob. The students are merrier than marble-playing boys. All play and no work. Lecturers mumble, like praying bishops, for their daily bread. If you hear them, you can sleep well. If you don't, you may well mind your own business or pinch your neighbour for the sheer love of it. It is all one long honeymooning. It's a fit and happy interlude in the somewhat arid play of our college life."

Ramu felt stung at this happy description. "Not a word about me, all about himself, not even the conventional question about the journey or the village or my mother or my own failure. No, not even a formal word of regret that I am not there with him at the Law College to share his joy. Really he is bidding for a change—years of my intimacy and sacrifice forgotten in the flush of success." Ramu mused like this but his kind nature chided him, "Perhaps I am growing jealous and see things with green eyes. Kedari has ever been an egoist. Perhaps he feels delicate to touch upon my failure and dishearten me by so doing. After all, condolence only emphasises the sorrow and obscures the sympathy. I am doing a wrong to Kedari in judging him hastily—" Ramu mused again in reverse terms.

But Kedari did not notice all these reflections in the face of Ramu, as he, according to his masterful habit, was delivering his speech not facing his audience but gazing upon the wide meadow in the

front and irregularly fixing his eyes upon the smooth and shining rails that ran in parallel lines to the infinity of Rameshwar. Kedari's mind roamed along these lines of destiny like a light engine uncurbed by tender or load.

"Well, Ramu, life is a gordian knot best cut in the only rough way known to great men of action. The oyster opens both to the sword and to the pen —the underlying impulse is the same—only both should be applied with decision and energy. For instance, Balasundaram of the Presidency College had the arch reputation for conceit, cleverness and aristocracy. He is now my friend, tamed and loyal for ever. For, I took him by storm one day and he capitulated. Even he now greets me of his own accord and puts pleasantly his plumpy hands into mine. I will introduce you to him one day."

"But you called him a cram and a pedant and despised him just before the vacation. Kedari, really what a change!——" Ramu replied.

"Well, Ramu. Then I did not know him. And he did not know me. Nothing like mutual knowledge. It always results in sympathy. It removes the mists of misunderstanding and ignorance——."

"Nothing like success," Ramu murmured to himself. Ramu was silent and did not even respond with the 'sigh' of attention which encouraged the lectures of Kedari who gave him only the benefit of a flank-view on the score that this posture alone conduced to correct and energetic thinking. But

Ramu was absorbed in the new and costly silk-shirt and tweed coat, hanging from a stand of burnished brass. Kedari turned round, somewhat alarmed by the persisted silence and took in the whole situation at a glance.

"But Ramu, rightly you don't relish this style of talking. I'm sorry my jubilant conversation was ill-conceived. I thought I could divert you by this kind of talk. Pardon me, I was also in a depressed mood when you came in. Mutually to warm ourselves, I let myself 'go'. But words are sometimes rogues, derail us and send us on the wrong track to collide blindly with friends and foes. Let us go down for a bath. There is plenty of water at the tap here—in fact, it is a nice little fall of water if you get under. The bath will make us feel better—in fact move us to old moods of joy."

CHAPTER V

A DECLAMATION

THE next day Ramu joined the Christian College. Ramu felt that Kedari was moving in a different sphere. Kedari felt that however much he might bend to be equal with Ramu, Ramu would not acknowledge it. Both felt it to be an embarrassing position and the recollections of the past only made the position more unhappy. Living in the same room only accentuated the points of friction. Ramu silently meditated upon the crucial change in one of the noblest bonds of life—juvenile friendship, which a success or a failure in an examination of the university inflicted.

Both Kedari and Ramu made sincere efforts to heal what seemed to be Nature's cut. The bruises seemed God-inflicted and the heart silently bled under them. Ramu could not and did not keep silent any longer. One evening, Kedari returned late tired and depressed more than ever. Ramu asked him plainly, "Something is indeed wrong somewhere. Dear Kedari, four years we missed not an evening but we went together. Now, it is over a fortnight, you are not free to go with me, even one

day, but you return excited and depressed! Do you feel my presence a pain. Tell me, frankly. I am fretting myself within——."

"Equally so am I, Ramu. I am glad you have called upon me to explain," replied Kedari firmly and movingly standing as usual exposing his flank-view to the listener, "To begin from the very beginning. I did not condole with you for many things, for even I believe, in my deeper moods, that all sorrows and failures are but experiences for a higher making. Flashy successes like mine, like the rank growth of weed on any soil, are meant only to ripen a soul with all its imperfections uncured. They may perhaps please an immature and egoistic nature like mine. But I am sure the gods have meant you—deep, silent and intensely moral—for something great. If excellence like yours—nobility, gentility and a gracious knowledge of life, does not meet with success as we know it, then successes are not the true rewards of real merit. Can I ever mock at you? Or cease to regard you as but an elder brother? Pray, never misunderstand me even in my utmost frivolity. Friendship can't bear declamation. But as I know you suspect me, I once more avow my loyalty and affection to you in this life. Your loving sacrifices for me are great. Yes, Ramu, you belong to a higher order of men. Why should you care even if the world honours you not, and friends play you false." Kedari was really moved to tears, but did not turn to Ramu

but kept on watching the Ceylon Boat-mail speeding to Rameshwar, its appointed load of pilgrim and professional traffic, like a glow worm on the railway line.

Ramu was deeply moved by this noble assurance of his friend. "Yes, I am weak and was jealous of your success. Pity me and forgive me, Kedari, for my suspicions."

Kedari seemed not to hear this but was intent on the moving Boat-mail which he followed till it vanished out of sight. Then with an energetic shake of head he said, "You ask me why I don't take you out in the evenings with me. Come with me to-morrow and you will know everything."

CHAPTER VI

WIVING GOES BY DESTINY

IT was No. 15 Muthu Mudali Street. Janaki was as lovely as a hill rose on a December morning. She loved the pial better than the kitchen, being by nature curious and observant. She usually stood at ease, leaning gently against the pillar, glancing hither and thither, her long eye-lashes revealing and hiding a lotus-eye. She was just fifteen, the year of utmost innocence, youth and beauty for a Brahmin girl in a tropical clime. Every day had its ripening effect on her features. But she was unconscious of her exquisite loveliness amidst the squalid surroundings. She was deeply interested in the moving crowd of rich and poor that streamed in front of her every day to the market place. She mused of her father at times and much more recently of the friend of the family, Mr. Kedari. She had as yet only the vaguest notions of what marriage meant. Still she knew it was as inevitable and attractive for her this year as fine clothes were for a girl of five.

It was evening time and the weather was more than usually warm. Janaki stood as ever on the

pial watching the surging mass of men. She did not expect Kedari, as he had been there only yesterday and he said he would call again only next week. But Kedari stepped in with a significant smile, eyeing her with a long, lingering glance. A friend accompanied him. She stole a side-glance at the stranger and their eyes met for a fleeting moment.

Janaki felt considerably embarrassed, which Kedari ascribed to the presence of Ramu. But Janaki was at sea, as her mother was not at home and it was the first occasion in which she was obliged to receive Kedari while her mother was away. And the new friend Ramu was so full of meaning to her, was so unlike any other. He wore a rare and celestial look that she had never seen even in the variety of men that she had so lovingly reviewed these years from her favourite place on the pial.

"Janaki," began Kedari, reluctant to disturb the tremulous dream, "this is my friend Ramu of whom I have been talking hours without end—the finest soul that treads the ill-tarred roads of Madras." Both Ramu and Janaki blushed within and Kedari could not help partaking in the raptures. Inferring from Janaki's confusion and continued silence, Kedari asked, "Where is your mother, Janaki, is she not here?"

"We did not expect you to-day," gently answered Janaki, "as you were here only yesterday. My

mother has gone to the next street and may not return before eight in the night."

"To Suppu's house?" asked Kedari.

"Yes, if you would but tarry here for a few minutes," said Janaki addressing Ramu more than Kedari, "I will go and fetch her in a minute." She paused for a reply.

But Kedari was a man of action and acted. He jumped out with an insinuating glance and in a well contrived tone, "No, no, it is not fair, Janaki. Ramu, wait here a few minutes and Janaki will give you a cup of coffee and keep you engaged. I am sure you will find her excellent company. I will go and bring her mother in a moment, even before you drink the first mouthful—I know Suppu's house well—" He darted away. The joy which made Ramu dreamy, Janaki dizzy, made Kedari lively like an antelope.

It was not a moment. Kedari purposely made the minute into a full half-an-hour. He loitered in the bazaar asking for the price of sugar and sugarcandy per viss at wholesale rates. He was lost in a pure and innocent joy. Even Kedari's hard realism melted a little at the flame of Love. In such exquisite moments, he felt justified in relaxing his philosophy and spared a leisure hour to indulge his feelings.

But the divine half hour was one of utter silence both for Ramu and Janaki. Both essayed to speak but could not. Ramu in fact, even

thought of acting up to the love-hint of Kedari by asking for a cup of water. But he did not. Janaki in fact wanted to discharge the ordinary duties of hospitality by offering a cup of coffee. But she did not. It was one mutual fill of gazing and not gazing, one ebb and flow of seeing and not seeing. Each was deeply moved by the other. Ramu was aware of his being flooded with a new light and a new joy. His senses were getting acute with an inward vision of things. He was seeing better, hearing better, sensing better. He felt the flow of Janaki's breathing like a fragrant wisp of air blown from a bower. The palpitating heart filled the ear. All clothing seemed but a disguise to reveal better the shape and form within. A perfumed mist loaded the air. The eyes were half-closed with eyelids down, like a lotus bud not yet fully touched by the morning sun. The tongue was glued to the roof of the mouth. But everything spoke.

Ramu and Janaki heavily perspired with the joy of a new knowledge and a new taste of life. Ramu felt he saw the radiant vision of many a dream shining like a bright lamp in a low cellar. Janaki felt a new presence which intoxicated her girlish instincts—a vision of gentility, grace and culture, a duplicate rendering, a beautiful embodiment of her own nature, clothed in the charming attire and the symbolism of the male. It seemed a natural union of a twin, harmonic ever-flowing pleasure,—

the Ganges and the Jumna rising from the same snow-fed peaks, or the Cauvery and the Bhavani springing from the same range of hills of blue forests of sandalwood and devadaru, and surely mingling again lower down when the playful childhood of the hills and dales was over. Could it be He? Could it be She? They glided into a reverie of questions within. And before Meenakshi broke the dream by her firm steps, a marriage was already made in Heaven in spite of Murugan's entreaties in the name of the dying wish of a mother.

CHAPTER VII

AN HOUR OF DREAMING

"DEAR Kedari, you have given me the greatest gift a man can receive from another—an excellent partner for life, quite like me." Ramu spoke with sincerity and warmth.

"Dear Ramu, I did but repay my debt—one debt out of many. Kokilam is as much your gift to me as Janaki is mine to you. I would have never married Kokilam last year but for your strenuous and tender advice—almost command."

"Yes, it is so. I shall not compare them—two fair flowers. I am happy that the marriage ceremony was so simple, economical and free from the usual trumperies and the waste——."

"And celebrated with such solemnity and inwardness in the Presence of the Lord of the Seven Hills at Tirupathi. May He bless us all," said Kedari.

"If only my mother were alive," uttered Ramu in a brooding voice, "to see and receive Janaki, I could convince her. But we are yet too unripe for uncommon good—no one man is so choice as to

receive perfection even as a gift. Oh! if only my mother were alive how perfect would be my joy!"

"She blesses you even now, I am sure. No Hindu mother ever ill-receives at home the wedded wife of her son. The thing done is the thing blessed. And who will reject Janaki on any score?"

But Ramu lapsed into a thoughtful mood for a moment and wiping from his brow a small bead of perspiration said, "We are already entering life, Kedari, and both of us are without money. Alas! how I have run down my little estate often-times by foolish fancies. If I had conserved, both of us could be well off and see our way through the college course. But, happily, we have wisely saved the marriage dowry—one thousand rupees which we will use for our college course this year."

He paused again and began, "Next year Kokilam and Janaki may come of age and join us. Let us set up together and make a little idyll of our lives even on this worried planet. Let our married lives be but an extended commentary on our present and the new not a break from, but a rich continuation of the old. Let Janaki and Kokilam grow together like the *sampanki* creeper, ever green and ever fragrant, blossoming in a bunch and shining golden yellow in a cluster." He paused again and continued, now with eyelids down.

"Out of the one thousand, here is five hundred for you, dear Kedari. Take it in a lump so that you may not wait on my mood or mind for your year's

expenses, for every little copper you wish to spend."

Ramu paused again; Kedari could not speak but glanced a grateful look at every word and gazed with incredulous eyes on the shining discs of stamped silver—the current coin of the realm mounded before him in a purse of netted cotton string.

"Dear Kedari, just a year hence, you will begin to earn—till then Murugan will be our common patron—."

"Then I will earn for you and me, dear Ramu, till the end of my life. Words are but like buckets of water from the sea. None could be nobler than you——not even my own father——whom I never knew."

Ramu thought it was an opportune moment for a word of warning he wanted all along to utter "But Kedari, pardon me, if I feel at times like an elder brother, at least in age as I am, and warn you against the costly habits you are now cultivating. And yet another word against success that intoxicates. Wine is wine. Success is success. I am not jealous. Even the strongest heads can't escape the fumes. But you, dear Kedari, must be a lesson to the world—dashing, gay and courageous, brilliant and witty yet withal so humble like the humblest—you are to me the vision of the ideal man."

"You are right, Ramu, I feel so at times. I am thankful to you. But the qualities seem so far apart—."

"Never so far, dear Kedari, as at first sight they may seem to be. But true courage and true humility go together. Greatness and humbleness go together. The one is the test of the other."

"Dear Ramu, then you should know life in the Law College which, they say, is the little river that leads to the big. If our Arts education is false to true ideals, as you often say it is, and cultivates only the weeds of life, our Law education is the rankest growth of the falsest things in life. How I regret you are not there. Even you can't escape its falsity and fashion, its cant and humbug. It has the trade call of the market and view-points begin to change. You try to look upon culture as a means to an end—a commodity—and you know a market has its ethics different from the college room. But your warning is good. I will resist the temptation with your help—."

Kedari took Ramu by the hand which he left to sleep on his but not before pressing it with a warm and noble pressure which meant for both a world of joy, new and dawning. They were one again. But before Ramu could glide on to sleep,—for the night was getting late—he could not help feeling and did feel that if only he too had passed his B.A. (curse the Economics) and were in the F.L. class with Kedari, how sweet and equal his pleasure in life would be. He felt somewhere a grain of sand tearing the tender flesh within. Ramu murmured, half in dream and half awake, "Cursed University,

which passes and fails young men of mind and spirit and creates a subtle caste in God's wide, free and generous world of youth." Ramu started from this half-sleep and shook off this jealous mood and probing mind. Finding Kedari already in profound sleep, he too courted sleep.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DUST OF LIFE

MURUGAN kept toiling on at Alavanti ignorant of his master's marriage. He punctually remitted the proceeds of the harvest. He wearily counted the day for the return of his master at the close of the academic year and rubbed his hands in anticipatory glee of the wedding. Such an event had not taken place in the family for nearly half-a-century. Murugan even informally started negotiations with the parents of the bride selected by Ramu's mother, to avoid unnecessary delay in fixing the date of his master's marriage.

Janaki and her mother continued to live at Madras as they had no other place to call their own. Kokilam, Kedari's wife, lived in a far away inland village in the Madura district, the daughter of a pandit well-versed in astrology and Sanskrit.

Ramu and Kedari went together to see Janaki and Meenakshi every Saturday evening. Kedari's wit and brilliance were more than a match for Ramu's gentility and charm. Ramu was more a listener than a speaker. Kedari never listened

but always spoke. So he far outshone others in an atmosphere of combat. He enjoyed the high esteem of Meenakshi. She decidedly thought that Kedari had a greater future than Ramu, a 'good' boy. Kedari had drive, ambition and energy; Ramu had philosophy, gentility and charm. With the native instinct of a woman and the ambition of a mother-in-law for 'careers,' Meenakshi was certain who would win in the long run in the tumult of the world, if saintliness was not the avowed goal.

Janaki, while adoring her husband for qualities which she could deeply admire, for they were her own, still could not help being dazzled with the range and variety, with the power and invective and the essentially masculine qualities of Kedari's adventurous and predatory genius who rode his words as a Rajput did his steed. Kedari was the centre of attraction. He dominated the conversation. Even Janaki was developing a strong liking for Kedari in spite of her sincere devotion to her lord.

Ramu was a sensitive and a just soul. He admired Kedari not a whit less than these two women. He had himself openly acknowledged and applauded Kedari. But somehow the exhibition, often triumphant, of these qualities in the very presence of Janaki and Meenakshi irritated subtly even the deep peace of Ramu. He wished Kedari were less brilliant at least before Janaki

on Saturday evenings. But Kedari found himself always unusually full in the immediate presence of the mother and the daughter. The air was vivid and a strange renaissance kindled Kedari's whole being. Ramu soon found, in spite of his feeling that he was unjust to his friend, some excuses for going alone to Janaki and thus put off Kedari who understood the hint.

Kedari's was a powerful nature. Though capable of friendship for its own sake, he was also capable of viewing it only as a means to an end. He was becoming more prominent in the public life of Madras. His merits as a speaker on platforms were soon apparent. He tried his hand at journalism and found that it carried with it its own pennyworth of bread welcome, however little. He had already a scholarship at the Law College which paid his fees. And he had Ramu's five hundred in a lump. Kedari felt encouraged with a marked regard for his self-respect. His dependence of twenty years was at last drawing to a close. He began to view life from this little mound of financial independence and what a view it was! Everything appeared with a changed aspect, including Ramu.

Meanwhile the decisive event came in almost at the end of the term, just a month before he sat for the Examination. Kedari invited the leader of the bar, Mr. B. Markandam Iyar, he who made ten thousand a month and 'protected' under his wings

an army of 'juniors,' to preside over the 'moot' club of his College. It was an honour till then reserved only for His Majesty's Judges of the High Court, but Kedari, with characteristic courage, broke the convention in favour of Mr. B. M. Iyar who held already the record for record-breaking. The leader was pleased with the distinction and construed it as a preliminary flourish of Fortune before his elevation to the Bench. He heard Kedari speak at the club and knew it was the voice of the coming man. He had ever since cherished a kind memory for him, even recognised him with a still-born smile on the beautiful walks of the marina. He even once gave him passively a lift in his car, and mechanically invited him for dinner. He heard listlessly Kedari's story of poverty and adventure which called up a kindred recollection and sympathy in his own breast. In fact, Kedari was already planning his future as an apprentice in his busy office and treated the almighty leader with extra deference. The Law College already earmarked for Kedari the coveted place of a junior vakil in Mr. B. Markandam Iyar's office. Kedari's future was assured. These successes an forward visions kept him very busy and crowdeu out Ramu though he was still his room-mate.

Now and then, Kedari in retrospective moments struggled against his own ingratitude to Ramu, who seemed now only to encourage it. A break was inevitable. But Kedari argued with perfect

geometrical exactitude, when the terminus was different how long could two moving objects try to run on parallel lines? No one could or should fight the inevitable. Again, was not Ramu the first to cut him off—from Meenakshi and Janaki, his own relatives. He had not seen them even once for over six months. His crowded achievements hung rather heavy upon him uncheered by the virile praises of Meenakshi. Her praises were worth braving even Ramu's displeasure. He made up his mind to visit her one evening and Janaki radiantly floated down his eager vision adding strength to his resolve. Meenakshi entreated Kedari not to give them up. So Kedari repeated the visits.

Ramu came to know of them. He did not consider it exactly wrong of Kedari to visit his relation Meenakshi. But somehow he did not like it, though he could not help thinking that his own feelings were petty and jealous in this matter. Ramu was a gentle and calm soul, but even he felt disturbed.

Ramu's examinations were just over and Kedari's would commence the next week. Ramu abruptly left Madras the same evening on which his examinations were over, after a bitter quarrel with his mother-in-law. Kedari returned late in the night —for he was delivering a lecture on "Friendship" at a reading room to a muster of college boys while Ramu was preparing to leave—and found the room

empty. Kedari was neither glad nor sorry. Rather, he was both. He first thought of running up to the Egmore Station as the Ceylon Boat Mail had not yet left. But he changed his mind immediately and threw himself into a chair. Soon he sighted the Boat Mail rumbling over the track—South Indian trains don't thunder but are weary workers in a tropical clime. He fancied he saw Ramu peeping out of the window. But he did not know that Janaki too was there by his side in the speeding train.

CHAPTER IX

A RIVER SCENE AT ALAVANTI

IT was summer time and the first week of Vaisakh. The South-West monsoon had not yet set in on the western hills. The Cauvery was not yet a roaring and turbid river forbidding a free and playful bath. The water was clear and cool and the utmost depth came only up to the navel. The women, especially the younger, lingered longer in their bath and chatted merrily on everything under the Alavanti sun, spicy, social, religious, topical. Meanwhile the running water played all tricks and games with the loose ends of their long *saris*. But the deft and vigilant hands both encouraged and checked the amorous extravagance of the river and kept it within proper limits.

It was a bathing group of ten or twelve—young, middle-aged and old.

"Is Ramu's wife *gosha*?" cried one. "It's nearly a month since she came to the village but she has not been to the river even once. Is she bathing within, if at all, in well water or in hot water like a sickly old lady?"

"Or in a tub like a *doraisani* ?" echoed another.

"No, no, she is new and timid and all alone," said one who looked the youngest and brightest.

"New and timid !—but not new and timid to stand upon the pial morning and evening, when even elderly persons pass to and fro" cried yet another.

"And not move an inch or even set right the wind-swept *sari*," continued and commented a middle-aged lady who in her younger days was credited with many amours and who was still not above a little hour of flirt. "If her mother-in-law were alive she would flay Janaki alive and teach her the first lesson in modesty. It's poor Ramu who is timid —a town-bred boy who can't even cover up things."

"And clothed in a jacket like a *doraisani* down to the hip and the wrist," lamented an orthodox old lady who was once known as an able shrew but of unsullied reputation, "neither cooking, nor bathing in the river, nor yet going to the temple but living like a *neecha stri*. *Kaliyuga* is indeed approaching fast. I fear Ramu's wife will spread this evil among our innocent girls in the village."

"But I must say I like her though," protested the young and bright girl who had defended her first. "Janaki is fresh and intelligent and has a smile for you and me. Ramu is blessed in such a wife. Ours is a small, low and jealous life. We talk only spicy things about others here in the river and there in

the temple, scandal, dirt and tale, spend our day in cooking or in handling cow-dung like beasts of burden. We mock at others who are not like ourselves. I admire Janaki." She openly supported her but she was sneered at in the village as a town-bred girl and as one who held the plate for fashion in the village before Janaki came and broke the record.

"It is meet, Sita, that you should support Janaki. Both of you may become friends and set the village on fire or on revolt," exclaimed the orthodox old lady and added, "Pray God, that my eyes may close for ever ere I see them all."

The conversation here seemed to slacken, but Murugan came to the river to water and wash his newly purchased cow and incidentally tell the village how well he was going on.

"Lo! here comes Murugan, with his newly purchased cow. He is as absorbed in its gait as Ramu is in Janaki's. Let us ask him," cried one who till now had conserved her breath.

"Ask him also nicely about the rumour. Some say that Janaki is not of the same sub-caste as Ramu, but is a Madhva lady, picked up from an orphanage."

"Ask him also if it was a social reform marriage after she came of age. Betrothal and nuptials conveniently rolled into one," cried the youngest of the group who had waited four years to join her husband.

"What does Murugan know of these things, even if true," protested Sita in a low voice, "poor Janaki will find it hard to live here."

Meanwhile Murugan reached the spot where the bathing group sported with water and words. In the mischievous smiles that greeted him, he scented the nature of the coming questions and was well-prepared.

"Well, Muruga, how do you find your new *dorai-sani*," greeted one.

"You have brought even your new cow to the river and it does not shy, but not yet your master's wife," commented another. Murugan ventured a plain reply, heeding not the sly sarcasm. "I was grieved at first and thought ill of *Ammal* like you all. But she is a kind and nice lady, clever and good, but perplexed and new to rural things. In fact she wanted to go and join you and bathe in the river this morning, but she is so new and afraid."

More questions greeted him, for which he had no premeditated answer. Besides, his new cow shied at the gurgling river and women and refused to drink. So, Murugan returned immediately.

"I will go and fetch her to the river to-morrow. She is alone, poor Janaki," said Sita, more to herself, "I like her."

"Poor Sita likes town bred boys—and girls," pungently said to her neighbour the middle-aged lady who had once a great reputation, on hearing Sita's words not meant for others but uttered in a

pretty audible voice. "For Sita's husband is a rake and has not been home for weeks. Poor girl, she came blooming, but two years ago, like a fresh rose and now she has withered from lack of love. The worm has eaten her in the bud. These untrue husbands are but our greatest temptations. It is no wonder if she likes a boy like Ramu, so gentle and so sweet. Who wouldn't? She begins best, by liking his wife first."

"Ramu is a strong and virtuous boy and he will not be tempted," replied her neighbour.

"But you don't know Sita's virtues," summarily retorted the middle-aged lady. Sita did not hear the whole of this conversation but heard enough to know that it was some spicy talk about her and prepared to go home in sheer disgust.

Meanwhile in another part of the group, a jealous, poor lady, once rich, who always delighted to hear that others were in trouble, asked: "But they say that Ramu is heavily indebted and that Periaswami Iyar has an eye upon his lands, especially Murugan's *tope*."

"But he is a B.A. and may earn and pay off the debt," said another.

"Ramu is a pearl of a boy," all elderly ladies echoed in one voice.

"Janaki is a lucky girl," all young and recently married women echoed in another voice. But Sita did not remain long enough in the river to hear this.

Such was the talk on the riverside, free, gay and frivolous. The chatter was pleasant in the shallow water which mirrored well feminine form and motion. They sported like water nymphs with the feet resting crisply on the sandy bed. Dressed but lightly, their surplus *sari* floated down the current like idle wings of pleasure. The river gently played in and out. The flowing and golden water had a tonic action on the skin and made it soft as velvet and smooth as slate. It excited the sensuous tone and the style of the talk. The laughter and the words went rippling into the air, while the hands splashed for joy in the water and dived deeper and deeper till they touched the fresh sand. No wonder, then, that what others reserve for the tea-table, Hindu ladies reserve for their daily river-bath—the exchange of the day's news and comments on Ramu's romantic marriage.

It was the talk even in the ruined village temple, vivifying the dull hours of piety and worship of aged people.

Meanwhile Ramu and Janaki were not idle.

"Dear Janaki," said Ramu, "Murugan tells me that we are the talk of the whole village. Even a month has not been enough to lull their tongue or their curiosity."

"But if I go and mix with them," replied Janaki, "wonder will die. And I may learn from them some of the ways of village life and be happy and contented here. Shall I go for a

bath in the river to-morrow and break the ice gently?"

"You may if you care to, and have the courage. They will be talking only gossip and slander, harsh and hard things, irresponsible and gay, about you and me and the whole world. Our village life is rotten, ignorant and poor. I don't know who will set it right, by himself setting the highest standard."

"If not you and I, who will, dear?" firmly replied Janaki.

CHAPTER X

THE LUCKY BAG AGAIN

JANAKI, true to her resolve, went to the river next morning for her bath and mingled freely with all and disarmed criticism by her frank, free and amiable manners. She also discovered Sita and found in her a kindred soul and à very engaging friend. For, on her arrival, Sita sweetly volunteered to her the necessary sartorial tips for river-bathing and sundry hints about the general aspects of village life. Janaki invited her home for the evening, eager to know something of the mystery of her liquid eyes, somewhat sad with tears secretly shed and unshed.

It was the same evening. Though the sun was hot and sultry in the Agraharam or the residential quarters of the Brahmins, it was cool and breezy in the cocoanut garden. Murugan was tired of the day's work in the hot sun and was resting himself under the deep shade of a cocoanut, not idly but plaiting the dry and ripe leaves into a mat for thatching his house. Ramu walked in and Murugan welcomed his master's rare visit. For it was the second after his arrival.

"Muruga, I propose to toil like you with spade and plough and live a life like yours. Start me on, even now, with teaching me how to weave these cocoanut fronds into nature's own beautiful carpet or screen."

Ramu began in a serious tone. The style pleased Murugan who said, "Swami, the sight of you will cheer my work. Your mere presence is as good as work. But neither this nor work with spade and plough would be meet for your caste or for your soft hands. We are meant for this work. We do it cheerfully. Only, Swami should not be an absentee."

"But I must work with plough and spade, Muruga, otherwise how am I entitled to the food I eat?"

"That won't do. The whole village will laugh at us and Murugan's loyal soul will revolt. It is the order that we should labour for you. Each is meant for his own work—."

"But Muruga, I have failed in my work, I have failed again in the B.A. I must take to the plough or simply die of hunger—."

"Failed! All's well with Swami so long as Murugan breathes. Truly I am glad you have failed. Settle down in the village, Swami. The failure in the B.A. is nothing—it doesn't mean a monsoon failure. It is a good thing for us all, the gods be thanked—."

"You are right, Muruga, the gods have decided for me. I shall stay on here devoted to you and my

lands. How is the new cow getting on? Is she a good breed? Is that the one there? But the calf is so puny and the udder is so shrunk, Muruga. Does she milk? The pity is we cross our cows on the meanest ploughshare bull. Cattle-breeding in this country is stupid and is not yet a science. We must scientifically improve cattle breeding first and then only our agriculture will improve."

Ramu talked text-books and newspaper extracts, but Murugan failed to appreciate fully this scientific discussion and protested again, "Agriculture will improve if only the master remains at home and does properly and in time, silt-clearing of the channel, manuring of the fields and *maramat* and such sundry repairs."

Ramu thought it prudent to agree with Murugan for the present so as not to alarm him or to strain his own knowledge of agriculture.

Meanwhile, Sita, seeing Ramu pass down the street to the garden, thought it an apt moment to visit Janaki.

"Come in, Sita," cried Janaki, "I was just thinking of you. Ramu is away. Step in freely and you need not be shy even if he is here. Your presence is so cheering to me."

"What is the matter, Janaki, you do not look so bright as you were in the morning. Has the river-bath brought a chill? Not ill, I hope?" sincerely inquired Sita.

"Nothing. I am quite all right, but Ramu failed in the B.A. again. I don't mind it in the least. But he takes it so much to heart and says that he is worried only for my sake. I assured him I did not mind, but he would not hear."

"Ramu failed again!" cried Sita, "what a pity! He is the brightest boy in the whole village. The gods are unkind to him. But what does it matter if he fails now? He will pass next time. Or he may lead a happy life with you in this beautiful village on the banks of the Cauvery. B.A.'s don't get even thirty rupees a month and a clerk's life is wretched. My brother is one and I know his lot—in a distant place far away from kith and kin. I have not even seen him for the last four years. You may, dear Janaki, remain in this village—."

"But Sita, we are not so rich as you are," smiled Janaki.

"Throw my riches into the sea. With a husband like Ramu, simple and loving, seven acres will yield more joy than seven hundred. Riches bring but misery, for village wants are few. And if you have more than you need, you are but thrust on evil ways." Sita faltered and blushed and abruptly stopped and then began, "Excuse me if I am a little free and plain. Life is such—though I am yet young, I am older than you and know more and have seen more—."

"I understand you, Sita. You need not plead excuses."

"I only wanted to say that Ramu was educated and his education was riches. Village life is a little paradise for one placed like you, dear Janaki. For one thing, it will give me you. Your friendship is a bliss to me." She gave a look of joy.

Though Janaki felt a little embarrassed at the admiring and constant reference to herself and Ramu, she saw that it gave instinctive pleasure to Sita. So she even encouraged it. Janaki was too noble and innocent to be jealous. Sita was too pure and frank of heart to mince words even for convention's sake. They thus chatted on till twilight came and would have even continued but for Ramu's return. Sita gently withdrew and stole a look at Ramu. Though Ramu was eager to see Sita at close quarters, which he had not done for many a month, he could not, as Janaki's eyes engaged him to the full. On seeing Sita in his house Ramu considerably brightened, his compassionate nature losing its individual sorrow in the more complex misery of Sita.

"Well, Janaki," said Ramu, "how did you pick up the friendship of Sita—."

"The result of the morning river-bath, a free gift of a friend by *Cauvery Amman*—who is she, dear?"

"She is the daughter of a schoolmaster. But now she is like a book whose first page is torn before it is read. She is indeed a rare soul, in some respects like you, Janaki, but thrown upon a

dung-hill. Be her friend. It will be some comfort to her—."

"Dear Ramu," laughingly said Sita, "it seems to be a case of mutual admiration. She talks of you nicely—you talk of her nicely."

"Her misery makes me even forget my failure. Her husband is a rake. He is a little older than myself but was my class mate. Being a rich boy he was put to school late. He failed in the fifth form. The naughty ways of the village and flattery and the feeling that he was rich and need not toil for his food spoiled him. He now lives with dancing girls in towns, forsaking poor Sita who is a victim to her mother-in-law."

"But I must confess I am growing jealous of your interest in Sita," said Janaki, half seriously and half in fun.

"Hear me still, Janaki. I owe her a duty. For Sita's husband saved my life once. While I was being drowned in the Cauvery, he pulled me out, shouting for help. I will now save Sita and her husband. I will talk to him when I meet him next. I once had great influence with him. But after he failed and left school, I neglected him—."

"Even as Kedari neglects you now—true vengeance," said Janaki in a wayward manner.

"Yes, yes, I agree with you," said Ramu confusedly "I will implore him to take back beautiful Sita into his affections and give up his loose ways—."

"In saving a drowning man, pray don't yourself get drowned—." Janaki attempted a metaphor.

"Let me begin village reform with this simple act of love. Restore a husband to a chaste and loving wife. Will you grow jealous— ?"

"No—if only you promise that you will allow me to join in the work of reform—."

Ramu and Janaki were both absorbed in their own thoughts and Sita played a delicate and difficult part therein. But Ramu said, breaking the silence, "Well, Janaki, to turn to our own affairs. The gods have decided for me my own future. I'm not going to try for the B.A. again but settle down here—."

"Even so, Sita has decided for you and me—."

"I am more serious, Janaki. Let me place before you our ways and means—."

"Seven acres with a thousand rupees of debt," Ramu began.

"Dynamite to blow them up," smartly summarised Janaki.

"A debt is dynamite, I agree, if you don't manage prudently or live plainly. The seven acres will yield three hundred *Kalams* of paddy and the garden will bring in three hundred rupees. Careful living will help us to save three hundred rupees a year and we can wipe out the debt in five years at the most. We are two and I am blessed in you. Let us lead a godly and cultured life."

"But this Agraharam is full of gossip, stories and other things," remarked Janaki, and Sita floated down before her eyes.

"Let us change our residence. That best fits in with my plan. We may even sell this ancient house and pay a part of the debt and get free of spying, tale-bearing and jealous eyes. Build a little hermitage in the garden overlooking the sacred river with nature's own bricks and tiles. Let us labour like common tillers of the soil on our own land. Murugan will put us in the way. Let us set an example to the rich idlers here, card-playing, love-making, heart-breaking, bed-breaking rogues and cheats, who live richly on the sweat of the poor. No one, dear Janaki, is entitled to anything in this world which his own hands have not shaped for his joy—."

"This village is a little paradise to me, dear Ramu, viewed from the pial of No. 15, Muthu Mudali Street. Where Ramu is, is my Ayodhya. But my mother is there alone, proud and suffering at Madras; should we not send for her? The burden of my mother falls on you. It was your choice. When you chose me, you chose her as well—."

"I don't regret it, dear Janaki. It is a lovely burden, the mother who gave you to me. She would be an elder guide to this house—."

"But she will veto all our dreams and plans—."

"That is my fear, dear, you have guessed correctly. Her temperament is hostile to mine.

We are poles apart. She is ambitious. I am not. You are not. She is meant for fight and I am for peace."

"But——," interrupted Janaki.

"But the path of duty for me and of affection for you is clear. We must invite her to live with us. I will write to-morrow asking her to come."

"Write to Kedari also," Janaki pleaded.

"No. I am not going to make myself a fool again. He stands first in the F. L. He has not written to me. I am not going to—."

"Stands first in the F. L!" echoed Janaki with a slight pride and joy. Ramu was vexed and silent. He did not remember Kedari was a remote kinsman of Janaki. But Janaki remembered now and then that she owed Ramu to him and that her mother rated him a brilliant boy with a future and a motor car. She looked at Ramu and sighed a little inwardly—only for a moment. Soon she was in deep peace with herself.

CHAPTER XI

SUCCESS IS SUCCESS

"HOW I wish I had a son-in-law like you, Mr. Kedari, gay, dashing, successful, clearing the way through life, like an axe through jungle growth." Meenakshi greeted Kedari who came to see her at No. 15, Muthu Mudali Street to summarise to her his achievements in general during the last quarter. Kedari found a singular stimulant in Meenakshi's words of praise, rare but worth waiting for.

"You are doing a wrong to Ramu," energetically replied Kedari, "He is a rare and noble soul perhaps many years in advance of the times. He is a thinker and not a man of action and often thinks deep on the misery of life. He is not less intellectual than myself but not so showy. His perceptions are deeper and wider and the world is too busy to pause and understand him. He does not care to label his virtues on his forehead. The advertiser rules the world. Ramu knows it and rejects it. He does not believe in the philosophy of incessant action, and strenuous ambition. Perhaps if I had not been born so wretchedly I too

would have been another Ramu. You smile at my lengthy defence, madam. But I assure you you have the finest man south of the river Krishna for your son-in-law."

"A twice failed B.A. and a lord of seven acres," said Meenakshi calmly, "with the rot of a thousand rupee debt eating from the core. Ramu, meek and gentle as the lamb which would not bleat even if sheared. The wool is good for others—but he must shiver the hardest in winter—poor Janaki—Ramu is generous and foolish. He wasted, Kedari, do you know, the thousand rupees I gave him as dowry and would not even give me an account of it."

Kedari found Meenakshi more than a match for him and winced a little, but quickly recovered himself and wanted to say something. But before he could speak Meenakshi continued, "I am sure Ramu will render Janaki unhappy and make her into a kitchen wench. He has no future before him, unlike you, Kedari. Did you write to him and ask him to continue his studies ? Tell him that a failed B.A. is no better than a matriculate. You have not written to him at all ! Kindness indeed ! But you are a first class B.A. and the first in F.L., the friend of Mr. B. Markandam Iyar. Why should you remember poor Ramu now ? He is older and more useless than a worn-out garment—a rag."

"Be not so unkind, madam. Hear me. I wanted to consult you before I wrote," evasively answered Kedari.

"So, you have come here specially to consult me in this matter," she retorted with piercing irony, "your reply is not even clever. Ramu and Kedari, once good friends for five years! Do successful boys ever remember their unsuccessful class-mates and play-mates? It is opposed to the rules of the game of life."

"No, no, madam, I don't deserve this hard criticism. I am in a difficult position. If I write, he may not like it. If I don't write, he may misunderstand me. You rightly accuse me in your love of Janaki. But my position is a delicate one," energetically repudiated Kedari.

"You are clever at arguments now at least," said Meenakshi, seeing that she had gone too far and wishing to give Kedari no excuse to break with her, "It is no wonder you are so popular with the young and the old." She laid thick her feminine flattery. Though elderly, it was so cunning and graceful. Meanwhile, the postman came in and flung a letter at the threshold. Meenakshi broke it open and read.

ALAVANTI,

June 19.

DEAR MADAM,

The gods have decided my future for me. I am meant for the village. So, I propose to settle down here with Janaki to a plain life and enjoy with her

the peace and profits of agriculture. I invite you to stay with us as Janaki's mother.

Yours sincerely,

R. RAMACHANDRAN.

"Kedari, your delicate task is saved. Here is a letter from Ramu. He invites me—Kedari, read the letter—to go over Alavanti and be with him as 'Janaki's mother'. Look at the cold, and curt tone of the letter. You say Ramu is the pink of courtesy and gentleness and the finest man south of the Krishna." After a moment's thought she added, "Well, well, I will accept the invitation and go there and see if I don't return in a week with Janaki and Ramu together. Ramu is yet only a boy and must be taught to obey elders. An orphan is a drifting vessel. I must play the pilot. Ramu must be ordered and put to school again like a boy —alas! as I did my little boy of seven many, many years ago, Janaki's elder brother who would be now twenty-five, if alive, and a prop to the family. He was not like Janaki, docile and timid. He had a bit of my fire and zeal." She slipped into a soliloquy and Kedari hastily bid her good-bye.

CHAPTER XII

THE INFLUENCE OF MONSOONS

MORE water flowed down the majestic river at Alavanti. It was a troubled time for the three. Meenakshi fought like a lioness for her imprisoned cub. Janaki was in a predicament, watching the courage and persistence of her mother and the calm non-co-operation of her husband who kept the key of her cage. Ambition was met with contentment, anger by coolness, fight by peace, words by silence. It was too much even for Meenakshi who felt the emasculating atmosphere. Ramu dominated in a way which surprised himself and he discovered his strength for the first time. But the will of Meenakshi was none the less powerful. She achieved one thing. She vetoed the proposed removal from the ancestral home to the cocoanut garden as sheer lunacy.

Five months of trench warfare like this went on with little effect on either side and much waste of ammunition. It was the month of November and the North-East monsoon set in in dead earnest. Within living memory it had never rained so hard. Ramu, a lover of nature, had the brightest fancy for

the raining sky, cloud-swept and majestic. He delighted in Nature's fertilising downpour.

Ramu's heart was full of hope at the prosperity of his first agricultural year. The paddy fields were smiling and green and Murugan counted the days of harvest with the glee and eagerness of an expectant mother. The monsoon spell is usually for a week. But still it rained on for a fortnight and showed no signs of abating. The river was a terrible sight, swollen with floods and flowing up to its banks like a sea in motion, filling the hearts of the neighbourhood with alarm and vigilance. The floods increased. At dead of night the river breached a little to the west of Alavanti and ere break of day, it was a disastrous flood to man, beast and land. Ramu was ruined and sad like a captain shipwrecked. Janaki was benumbed and between her husband and her mother her being was rent in twain.

But Meenakshi foresaw in this Nature's catastrophe a silver lining, a strategic advantage. She renewed her attack. Janaki gently sided with her mother with the true instinct of a woman who primarily rates man as a bread-winner. And now Meenakshi could not be refuted. The future became a real problem.

The monsoon had made Ramu a changed man. The crops had totally failed and it would take three years to recuperate the losses and get into working order. He must earn for all three of them or retire into the jungles as a Sanyasi. That was

impossible when the charms of Janaki were yet so ripe. He must earn. Going back to college was unthinkable—with neither the mind nor the money. Fate had decided that he should become only a clerk. Why should he resist it? Meekly submitting to Fate and to Meenakshi, he promptly began to pen applications for Government jobs in all the twenty-five districts.

One fine morning he had an offer from far away Cuddapah of the post of camp clerk to the District Collector on twenty-five rupees a month. He thought of arid Cuddapah and its only repute for a blazing sun and malaria and his own beautiful village on the banks of the river. His heart sank within him. But Meenakshi rejoiced at the good luck dawning for Janaki at last. Ramu made a weak attempt to resist. He tried to discuss the poverty and menial nature of a camp clerkship in a Telugu district but his mother-in-law met the arguments simply by packing more things for distant Cuddapah. He yielded to fate.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FAREWELL

AFTER Meenakshi's arrival Sita and Janaki could not and did not meet often. But each felt for the other. Sita learnt of Ramu's appointment at the river side in the morning and visited Janaki in the evening to bid her farewell. Mothers-in-law curb young hearts and comradeship, and Janaki rarely visited Sita at her house as her mother-in-law had a notorious prejudice against Janaki as she even suspected her caste. When Sita came, it was free and opportune. Ramu was away at the garden. Meenakshi was away at the river. Janaki was alone.

"The greatest loss is mine, Janaki, I feel a sister's love for you."

"Quite so, Sita. We too feel it. Indeed, Ramu was saying only just now that none will regret our absence except two in the village, Sita and Murugan."

Sita slightly coloured and said, "Yes. Ramu is very kind and noble." She continued, gently taking Janaki's hands into her own. "I wished to tell you many days ago and discharge my debt of heart,

about Ramu's kindness to me and my husband. I will utter grateful prayers by river and temple for your prosperity. You have restored me to my husband—Ramu's weighty words have weaned my lord from his evil ways and I owe my home to you. My husband is now kind to me as he has never been ever since my marriage. I thank Ramu through you, as our custom would not permit my thanking him in person. Janaki, if I may speak out my heart to you, I would thank Ramu in person, not by words but by prostrating before him." Sita spoke in moving words.

"You may do so, Sita, even now. I don't mind it at all—the custom or my feelings. I am not at all jealous. You are so pure and innocent. It would even interest me. And Ramu talks no less of you."

Janaki spoke plainly and soothingly these kind words knowing that they would heighten Sita's joy, and pressed her hands with a smile on her lips. Sita had expected silent resentment from Janaki but her words eased and quickened her pulse. She was surprised by this sisterly sympathy. She blushed confusedly and could talk no more. Her mind slept like a spinning top.

The floods did no harm to the cocoanut garden which stood on a slight eminence on the river bank. It only looked the gayer, and fresher for the deluge. "Don't blame me, Muruga, blame the monsoon. I stood firm many months but I can't fight even

Nature. I have to support three souls now. And failure of crops for one year means prostration for three." Ramu broke the news to Murugan.

"It is so, Swami," replied Murugan in a pleading voice, "if the failure is due to want of water. Here the mighty floods have left behind the richest manure on earth, three inches deposit of silt. It is Nature's own manure to replenish the wasted soil. It is a blessing in disguise, we will have double the produce at the next harvesting. We will begin to plough even now. Meanwhile, I will get some seed, at least as a loan. Everything will be all right in another five months. We, hardened farmers, are not afraid of floods though educated men and womenfolk are. Pray, Swami, stay on. Again, I will work the hardest in this *tope*. You know that a cocoanut tree is a *Kama Dhenu*. Work hard at it and worship it. It will keep us and the world alive."

"How is it possible, Muruga? We will have to purchase seed paddy, food paddy, pay the cost of labour, pay the *kist* to the Government which never relaxes but ever works blindly like a machine, and the interest on the debt and keep alive three bodies—provide for you and Ponni also at least on a meagre scale. This garden can't bear that weight. Face facts and don't dream, Muruga, for love of your master."

"Murugan's words are a poor man's words. Swami may not trust them. But I know my work,

even as yonder bull knows the irregular track to its field or back again to its shed."

"Even if it is possible, Muruga, such a lean and precarious life is hated by others about me. I see their point though I don't share in it. In any event, it is too late. Everything is settled. To-morrow, early in the morning when Venus will have just risen in the East we depart, bidding farewell to the bright star and my village. Knowing your well-meant opposition, I kept every thing a secret from you till now. I have now come to bid you farewell, Muruga. I have accepted a clerkship at Cuddapah."

"Cuddapah!—it is as far away as Benares. No, no, Swami, it will not suit your delicate health," exclaimed Murugan.

"But my plans are settled and clear. It is not a job for me for ever. I will confide in you alone, Muruga. I will work only for three years and pay off the debt from the savings and the yield from these lands of which I now make you a lessee."

"A lessee!" exclaimed Murugan.

"Yes, for a fair sum of two hundred and fifty rupees a year, fields and *tope* together. Remit punctually every year. It may be that I shall not come over here even once a year. It is a fair lease. You can save as much if you develop the habit of thrift. For your sake, Muruga, I don't entirely regret having got a job."

"Swami," Murugan replied with tears in his eyes, "on this occasion I should not weep, though my heart is near to breaking. Your home has never been locked these seven generations. But now it will be unkempt and untenanted. However much I may clean it, keep watch within, it is a lordless house that will surely go to waste like an unhandled spade. The fields will never smile so well as when they hear the tread of the master. The ears of corn that peep out for a look at you through sunshine and storm, and dance for joy before wind and rain, will hereafter turn to chaff, sickening within, and yield nothing in harvest time. Pray master, remain at home. My heart is throbbing like the eye with a particle of straw in it."

"Muruga, what you say makes me sadder still. I would build my little house with you in this pretty garden facing the sacred river, dig and plough with you and be for ever happy. I tried it but my fates—the monsoon and my mother-in-law—have decreed otherwise. All is for the best. Let us hope so and do the day's work with cheer." Ramu threw a wistful glance of farewell at Murugan and silently returned.

Meanwhile Sita felt a strange pleasure and peace of mind at Janaki's child-like and loving words. They brought her a comfort she had never known before. She felt deeply thankful for the change that came about in her life due solely to Ramu's intercession. As the evening grew dark, bidding farewell

to Janaki in trembling and affectionate tones, Sita went straight to the village temple to offer her prayers and thanks to the god. It was a small, handsome Vishnu temple once in good condition but now almost neglected and without even regular services.

Ramu was returning from the garden to his house and the temple lay on his way. Though a rare worshipper at temples, he thought he should pray to the village god and take His blessings on the farewell day. He found the temple as lonely as ever and entered the inner chamber where the idol was enthroned. A small light flickered a feeble flame and lighted but faintly the idol's face and the darkness around. He surveyed the whole chamber to and fro. A shadow fell on his eye-line from behind a pillar. A female figure emerged gently and Ramu's heart beat fast. The Ambhal —the temple goddess—was reputed for her divine powers in spite of her ruined temporal state and was known as a *prathiyaksha daivam.* Was he now in the throes of a revelation and in the Divine presence ? Ere he could recover, the figure came quickly and prostrated before him, the hands, warm and perspiring, joined palm to palm, touching the ground before his feet. A feeble but distinct voice said, "I am Sita. Forgive me for my boldness and unwomanly ways. I came to thank the Ambhal for the change she wrought in my life through you. Lo! she has sent you in person to me. Should I not worship you when the Voice is

so clear ? Forgive me, if I seem immodest. In this holy place, prostration is the only form of worship and words—."

"Sita, rise up, I was a little alarmed. I am indeed glad there is a change for the better in your home life. Let us offer thanks to the Ambhal together. I met your husband at Kumbakonam and spoke my mind with warmth and feeling. I am glad."

" He is kind no doubt now, but he is still so wayward. And you are going away—" murmured Sita.

" The evil life of many years can't be changed in a day. Sita, everything depends upon your skill in managing—."

" But still man is man and my lord has views and ways so far removed—" she hesitated.

" Yes, from educated ways. It is a pity, Sita. Pardon me. You were meant by nature to adorn a lovelier place and person. I can't understand our scheme of things so ill-fitting, untrue and unjust to beauty and virtue. The gods are both kind and unkind. Marriage is a riddle, like the blue of the sky or the tint of the sea. It is a wayward cloud. It does rain and does not. These things, Sita, have made me think."

" You are right, Sir, marriage is like the nail in the finger—an ornament when it is close and living with the flesh but an ugly thing when pared."

"It's a homely and telling figure, Sita, which well expresses the idea," warmly said Ramu.

"Janaki told me just now that you are leaving for Cuddapah to-morrow. It is the greatest loss to me. Janaki's presence cheered me most and kept me alive till now."

"I propose to keep to that job only for two or three years. You know, Sita, I am not rich. I must leave the village because of the floods and earn my food."

"Pray, remember me as an innocent friend of your Janaki. We must not remain here longer talking like this, even in the presence of God. What would any village imp say if he sees us now," said Sita in a low and gentle voice.

Ramu wanted to say a hundred things more but Sita's warning and his regard for her cut him short. They left quickly the temple precincts by different doors before some one, as stray and pious as themselves, saw them and built a gossip on it for the whole village, to be threshed out and adorned to the last detail at the table-talk at the river next morning.

CHAPTER XIV

RAMACHANDER—THE CAMP CLERK OF MR. CADELL

RAMU, the gentle soul of Alavanti, became Ramachander, the camp clerk of Mr. Cadell, M.A., I.C.S., the Collector of Cuddapah. The family of Mr. Cadell had had a long and intimate connection with India from the days of Clive and Coote. In fact the first Mr. Cadell had fought gallantly side by side with Sir Eyre Coote in the famous battle of Wandiwash. Another Mr. Cadell had been the Collector of Tanjore in the palmy days of the East India Company and held lordly sway over the royal heads of Serfoji and Sivaji, the last of the puppet kings of Tanjore. There were also numerous other Cadells employed in South India in the military and civil administration of the country both before and after its transfer to the crown. But no Cadell had ever landed on the Coromandel Coast with a more distinguished career at Oxford or a higher resolve to consolidate once and for ever the scattered work and fame of the family and inscribe the name of

Cadell in the roll of Empire Builders in the East which begins with Clive and Hastings.

So Mr. Cadell was a conscientious and hard-working Collector with a high sense of duty and a severe outlook on life which the study of classics had engendered in him, in addition to the traditions of the Indian Civil Service. He had the reputation of being a most difficult man to please and the camp clerkship fell vacant every quarter.

Ramu heard the story of Mr. Cadell's severity with dismay and failure at heart. When he was ushered before the great presence of the Collector, he recollected with pain that it was the first occasion in a period of three centuries when a member of his family was obliged to accept a menial job. Mr. Cadell viewed him from head to foot, as a white trader would estimate a new negro slave at the market, and asked in imperious tones, "You are Ramachander of Alavanti? I had three dozen applications from graduates but I selected you as I don't want young and scheming men of brains about me, for whom your district is justly famous. I want men of character—a straight-forward, honest and plain personal clerk. I see you were a Christian College student. The certificate you enclosed from the Rev. Mr. Craig speaks well of your character without a word about your ability. You are just the man for me. The Rev. Mr. Craig is a conscientious professor. Do your duty well and earn my appreciation and your salary. The

Headclerk will let you know the details of your work. Be ready in three days for call at any time. You may go now."

Ramu was dismissed curtly and dared not utter a word but meekly received the construction of the certificate about his ability. He swallowed his pride for the pleasure of Rs. 25 per month. Soon Ramu found out the hard nature of a clerkship under the very nose of the Collector in the hot and barren district of Cuddapah. Life was one uncomfortable journeying for him in the midst of loose canvas, tents, pegs, folded-chairs, tables, and such sundries set in motion in bullock carts over country tracks generally during the nights. He did the drudgery without murmur, drew the pay and passed it on to his mother-in-law. He was away twenty-five days of the month on circuit and saw very little of Janaki. Nor did he wish to see often the joint authors of his present misery. After a few months, he was even interested in his work, for he began to learn more of the world, which served as a corrective to his studies—the world of toadies, snobs, slaves—their avarice and ambition, their cruelty and exploitation, high brows and low brows and above all the rigid and complicated machinery of administration. Ramu intellectually appreciated the narrow and technical excellences of Mr. Cadell and blamed his inhumanities on the traditions of the Service which started viewing Indians as barbarians and as members of an

inferior race waiting to be civilised. He wondered why the Scotch professors at the Christian College were so kind and free from colour prejudice and the Civil Service so aloof. The evil was not in the man but in the system. His experiences well fed his thinking and so Ramu even liked his work. Mr. Cadell too, for all his fastidiousness, could not find any fault in Ramu's work though he thought that Ramu had an inner estimate of himself as high as Mr. Cadell thought of himself. But it was hardly a matter for punishment, if not expressed in active insubordination, even under the Civil Service rules and regulations.

Meanwhile, Meenakshi and Janaki, with their work lightened by the continued absence of Ramu, correspondingly developed further their powers of conversation and criticism. In fact their house was the meeting place for idle talk, and even Janaki became somewhat roughened. Ramu knew it but was indifferent. Three such uneventful years rolled on.

CHAPTER XV

THE EVIL IS IN THE SYSTEM

BUT it was a more fruitful period for Murugan at Alavanti. Ramu's departure, which Murugan sincerely deplored, proved to be a turning point in the latter's life. Murugan the lessee was indeed an evolution from Murugan the tiller of the soil, from a beast of burden to a man.

"Ponni, this year's harvest will prove even better than last year's. See how the land is loyal to true work, when the owner is the tiller. This little girl of ours, the latest gift, is a harbinger of good luck."

"She takes after me. We must also go in for a cow of our own. It will help us in many ways. We will have milk for the child and manure for the fields. It is the symbol of growing prosperity. From one to many it will increase."

"Even as you do, Ponni." Murugan laughed at his wit, looking at her and the children. Shading his palm over his eyes, he looked out and said, "There, Thoppai is going over to us, crossing the fields—with some tale of misery—spirited and fine lad he is—."

"I like him not," said Ponni.

"You may not. But he has fine work in him, if the master only knows how to use him. He is bold and self-respecting, being a town-bred lad, and does not easily bend to the rather rough and pitiless yoke of Periaswami Iyar, a little brute, who works hard his poor men—."

"The gods be thanked we are under a kind master," said Ponni, drawing her little daughter to her knees as Thoppai approached.

"Muruga, what a little heaven this garden is for you, under the cool shade of cocoanut trees," Thoppai greeted Murugan, "and what a vile lot is mine!"

"Why, Thoppai, why do you complain? You have the honour to belong to the biggest *Pannai* in the village. We are but small lots. Yours is the pride and power. And your Iyar says that my master is but a run-away and a poor quill-driving clerk for hire."

"Hang the *Pannai* and the Iyar. If I had the power, I would twist these coco-fibres into a rope here and now—and there he goes—I would catch him in a trice by his knotted hairs and hang him to the nearest tree."

"But you are mad, Thoppai, to talk so rashly. You will ruin yourself—."

"He harasses me and flogs me. I will teach him a lesson. Thank God, I am a town brat."

"Don't be hasty, Thoppai. Or you will come to grief. You are militant. Look at the Mudaliar's

Pannai in the next village. It is harder work and he is more cruel. It is our fate. Iyar is at least a mild Brahmin; it is the work of his agents who are *pallees* and *padayachis* like ourselves. It is our own men who are cruel."

"It is so, Muruga, but I'm not in a mood for nice distinctions. I'm not in Mudaliar's *Pannai* and I'm concerned only with this Iyar. One month of my pay is in arrears. Even unmarried men have a stomach and a few habits. He treats all his men like this—poor things—all the others are cowards—I would not be one—."

"Wait and be patient, Thoppai," said Murugan.

"No, not a minute longer, my soul is in revolt. I am giddy and faint with hunger," said Thoppai, "my life is rattling through the ears in agonised fits. In the name of your little child, Muruga, will you give me a tender cocoanut to slake my thirst and hunger?"

"May god bless you," and Thoppai drank with eyes wet with gratitude and spilled cocoanut water.

Murugan began his advice, "Thoppai, the evil is in the system and not in the man. One is ground down by another, only we don't see all the steps of the flight. Look here, when I was a mere tiller of the soil like you, however kind the master be, and however hard-working I was, this field yielded but five *kalams* of paddy. Last year it gave ten and now it will yield twelve or thirteen. Nay I budget

even for fifteen, to tell you frankly. Nothing is so sinful as hired labour. It curses him that hires and him that is hired. But the world is slow at changing. And the greed of man takes time to go down little by little. The happy thing is, a beginning is already made in the right direction. Let us win our place not by revolt but by patient work, and wait for better times."

"It's so, Muruga, so far as you are concerned. You can talk like a philosopher. But a hungry stomach does not make a patient thinker. I can't think of anything but arrears of wages and the hard work for the morrow with an empty stomach. Wait at master's backyard till fall of night for his pleasure—to be paid one evening with some old, rotten paddy which could not find any market. Then take it home, husk it and make *conjee* and eat it at dead of night and sleep thereafter and ere the day breaks you are roused for work. I wonder how so many have put up with this for so many years. Perhaps, as some say, the printed books I read in town have turned my mind and I see differently from others. Thank God, I am unmarried and can afford rebellion—I wonder how we have lived on so long—."

"You think, Thoppai, rather differently from others," Murugan warned again, "remember, once our days were harder. Now they are better. Times are improving. Work and wait. You will have your day. You may even work with me, if you don't

like Iyar." Murugan diffidently and mildly added at the end.

"I have plenty of work in me, Muruga, but I loathe to work for others."

"But you must work for others before you can work for yourself. How can you start with nothing? I felt somewhat like you in my younger days but never so keenly as you do. It is dangerous to feel so warmly even if it is just. It takes away the little strength of even the little you eat. You may have your chance one day. Don't rebel and fight with big people and court trouble. Work on. God is great. I will help you. He will reward us at the end."

"Do you know, Muruga," said Thoppai, "why I was called Thoppai? Because I loved only eating and talking at my uncle's home in town. My belly was the most pronounced part of my being. The young and the old called me 'Thoppai' meaning 'belly' and it stuck on."

"What was your uncle?"

"He made money as a bricklayer in town and fed me well. My aunt also ran a sweetmeat shop and it was a merry time when I acted as the vendor in her absence. Alas! Both of them are no more. They put me to school. I read enough to know that the world is wicked and nothing more. Muruga, you have never lived in a town. Town life itself is a school for the poor—to know how poorly off they are in this wide and rich world—wide and rich only

for a few. Alas, Muruga that you are not of the rebellious mould to feel with me!"

"Rebellion is no use, Thoppai. Be with me. I will help you. Quit the big *pannai*." Murugan offered, and Thoppai murmured thanks. Ponni always eyed Thoppai as if he were an owl or a bird of ill-omen that should be satisfied and sent away. She did not approve of Murugan's kindness. But Murugan had both sympathy and admiration for Thoppai's bold views on Life and Letters.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ROSE WITHOUT THE THORN

RAMU had completed his three years of camp clerkship and was feeling in the same strain as Thoppai. But Meenakshi and Janaki were happy and contented with their lot, like Murugan. But Janaki was of late feeling somewhat tired of her lonely and monotonous life. Meenakshi dwarfed Janaki's growth in the spring time of her life.

"It is over a fortnight, mother, since Ramu has left us. Do you expect him back at least to-day? It's hard life for him—these three years not to have homely meals for even three days in the month."

"Dear Janaki, don't be sentimental. Men are for work even as we are for the kitchen and its smoke. If even in youth one does not work hard how could one get on? Ramu's faults are his virtues. You should speak our mind to him in plain words that convince. He must dare a little more and achieve a promotion from the camp clerkship. See, what Kamalam our neighbour says. No one has ever been a camp clerk for three years."

"But what could Ramu do, mother? He does his day's work well."

"Too well, Janaki, that's the fault. He is making himself indispensable—such an ideal camp clerk that the Dorai Saheb will not let him go. He is the rose without the thorn and even a child can pluck the bud and cut its growth. That won't do—to be trodden even by a stray cattle."

"Do you advise him to—." Janaki asked despairingly.

"Not to do any wrong openly and be caught," interposed her mother, and spoke warmly, "where is the camp clerk in the world who confined himself to the pittance of a salary and lived honestly by borrowing when he had three souls to support and older debts to discharge—borrowed not for a sister's marriage, but for his own education? People are thinking, because he has the ear of the Collector, that he is making large sums but in fact we are getting more and more into debt."

"Debt! how, mother, why should we? Even Ramu is not at home!"

"But do we get our *saris* and clothes free and Ramu his newspapers and books?"

"Then we should cut them down and live more simply and try to save."

"The most foolish thing to do! Then nobody will respect us and even our maid-servant will demand her pay in advance. Dear child, you don't know the world or you know it as well as Ramu does. Then nobody will even lend us. Credit is the finest thing in the world,—like some rare

flowers, it is not raised on saw-dust or in a day. Your daily life goes to make up your credit. Live high, God will assure you a fair competence. Just the thing which both you and Ramu should learn. You first, so that Ramu may learn better."

She paused for breath and before Janaki could say a word she began, "Look at Kamalam. Do you know how low he and she began life? He—from a *mochi* or attender, to the exalted position of a Sub-Magistrate. She is lordly now and dresses finer than the Collector's wife. How? You know how—from the bated breath of petitioners who visit him or her everyday. When the life and honour of simple folk are in peril often for an unknown cause, who will not give to purchase peace, if only you know how to ask for it and name its price? Kamalam is clever and knows how to manage the business, and her husband has faith in her. Kamalam so managed it from the beginning. But dear Janaki, you are so soft that even Ramu's tread frightens you. If men are meant to rule the world, women are meant to rule the men that rule the world. God will only help those who help themselves."

She paused again and began, "Let us all learn from Kamalam. Firmness, dignity, courage, all are firmly planted in her now though her birth was low mire—the daughter of a *Panchangi*. Though we go to her house ten times a month she has not cared to return it so far even once. Still, the world is such,

we should but kiss the kicking feet, till we in turn find people to kiss ours. The mere fact that we are in friendly terms with her has its own reward of prestige and perquisites—vegetables and presents and the surplus of all those things that perish in a week. We can't ignore her. Let us face facts and go and see her now." Meenakshi repeated as Janaki showed a slight disinclination to move. Meenakshi was about to start while steps were heard.

"Come in, Kamalam," pealed Meenakshi's voice in a cordial tone of welcome, "you will live a hundred years! We were just talking of you and about to call on you—a rare visit, madam, it is a proud day for us, a red letter day. Janaki prepare some choice coffee for our distinguished visitor."

"Thanks, Meenakshi. This is not the proper time for coffee. I have mixed a little business with pleasure. I have not much time just now—I have to beg a little favour of you. Ramu is a pet of the Collector. My husband is now in troubles on some false charge. Will Ramu help us, by putting in a word discreetly about my husband to the Collector—how his honesty and integrity have made him unpopular here—and we want also some confidential papers. When is he expected back here?"

"I will do it with pleasure. Glad of a chance to return your kindness. Ramu is expected every

minute. In fact we were just talking about him. We have not yet dined expecting him." Meenakshi scarcely finished and Ramu arrived. Kamalam quickly and shyly returned home. Meenakshi was grieved much, for she had hoped to retain Kamalam in her house the whole day with some talk or other and make it known to the whole town that she was not after all a mere camp clerk's wife's mother. Ramu was in a very sullen mood and spoke to no one but dined without a word and shut himself up for the day till the evening.

CHAPTER XVII

PRESTIGE IS THE SPARK OF OFFICIAL LIFE

THE whole collectorate of Cuddapah wondered that Ramu, the mild Brahmin, still continued to be the camp clerk of Mr. Cadell, the fastidious Collector. It was a very sunny evening and Mr. Cadell had reached headquarters at Cuddapah only early that morning. The Collector's bangalow was a fine residence situated in an expansive mango grove on the banks of the Pennar. The *Jamabandi* work of the year was just over and every one was feeling relaxed at the conclusion of the strenuous revenue collection and audit of the year. Mr. Cadell was lounging in a broad canvas chair, rocking it a little to and fro and occasionally biting a pencil as a dog still gnaws a fleshless bone.

"Dear, I have so rarely seen you, in a reflective mood," broke in Mrs. Cadell to describe whom we shall not spend words, "I am loath to break it. A busy man of action slipping into a reverie! But I'm alarmed—and the pencil, between your

teeth, is my favourite one with which I mark my books."

"Your Sanskrit books and studies, your philosophical books would be polluted by my breath—I fear, my dear, but for your complexion, you are almost a Hindu," laughed Mr. Cadell, throwing the pencil to her; and he continued in serious tones:

"Ramachander, my camp-clerk, is a puzzle like yourself, dear, and is worth your philosophic study."

"Nothing to study for one who sees him without official eyes. He is a simple, straightforward clerk whom you often ill-treat, for all men of action think simplicity is nothing but stupidity—and even suspect it—for simplicity is impossible to you."

"Thanks for your lecture, dear, I am glad you don't go deeper down and pick up some shell and call it a pearl. I like Mr. Ramachander, on the whole. He is a rare type among Indians. That's my opinion after knowing him for three years. That is why we judge by doubling the standard of test. He compels us to think, his mildness, meekness and his mind-powers. Your brother Mr. Craig is quite like yourself—misses the essentials. Do you remember the certificate? The mind-quality of Ramu is the best thing about him and he has not said a word about it. It's a spring that rises from a hidden source and flows through a rare soil of character. Mr. Craig knew the river only

by sight but never had even tasted its sweet waters—all educationists are sheer waste."

Mrs. Cadell tried to interrupt but in vain. "I wish, dear," her husband continued, "you knew more of Ramu. You would then study India at its best. He has strong views but never forces them on you. He states them and leaves them there. He is courteous but not servile. He is self-respecting but not arrogant; never protests, never carries tales, never complains, never takes or gives a bribe, even the smallest coin of the realm. He goes on in his own way, as he says, doing his *dharma,* like the river Pennar through the wilds of Cuddapah. There are very few in India like Ramachander, and not very many among us—there is a subdued charm and point in all that he does and says—but it takes time to get into him."

"But, dear," she cried, when she found a moment's pause in the flowing panegyric, "you have a curious way of admiring; you adore within, but treat roughly without. I know, dear, you ill-treat those whom you love, and repent at leisure." A significant smile she shed upon herself. "You treated Ramachander very roughly this morning. I read resignation from his looks. And you were rough with him for a fault which you later on found out to be your own. And you did not even apologise."

"Apologise in public to my own camp clerk! the world would laugh at me. That is why I am

in a reverie now—a repentant reverie. I will wipe it out tomorrow by a kind word, by calling him by name loudly in the presence of the Head Clerk and with a smile."

"But is that not a wrong to yourself, dear. What harm is there in openly apologising ?"

"You speak like a woman who has no need to act in this world. Prestige is the spark of official life, without which we should turn to cold ashes. You can't afford to admire your camp clerk in public. The administration would be at an end and—."

"Chaos spread throughout the length and breadth of the country! But does it even forbid courtesy ?"

"But how could courtesy grow in such an atmosphere ? Habit is all powerful. Driving power is sullen. It never smiles. The coachman ever keeps the whip cracking lest the horses slacken speed."

"The rest of it, I know—a bad coachman indeed! But it is the philosophy of every man of action. Crush others first to save yourself from being crushed. It is shallow and cruel. But this philosophy never founded for us this Empire. We are not social now. We are glum and aloof. That is not the way of knowing the ruled. We are now simply living upon the capital of our wise fore-fathers' work. Why not invite Mr. and Mrs. Rama-chander to tea, and try to get to know their customs ?"

"I also feel like you, dear."

"If you are a true man of action, act up to it."

"I should be laughed at and the administration would fall into contempt and chaos. The prestige of my class would go. Once we lose the reserve and the power of silence we are undone—."

"Never—you are wrong, dear. For in the Company days, your great uncle was a Collector, like yourself at Tanjore and did mightier things—kept powerful kings in check, not by reserve and silence but by speech and persuasion. Moved freely with the people and the Raja, spoke Tamil, and Telugu, and knew all their customs and manners, not from tourist books but from life, and even ate rice and curry. They built an empire on knowledge, but we don't know if we shall even keep it for a decade at this rate."

"Though you talk like a book, dear, you are wise and right. But times have changed from commercial to political, from trade to sovereign power and who can break a tradition? And how can one man change it all in a day, dear?"

"Only one man can change the affairs of men. All changes are not team work, but are often the work of only one man."

"The time is not yet ripe—perhaps never will be in my day—till deeper causes lead to deeper effects," murmured Mr. Cadell to himself.

Just then the Duffadar came in with a letter to Mr. Cadell. He broke it open and flung it to

Mrs. Cadell, who read it and said, "I said so. There is already prophecy in my words." The letter ran as follows:

CUDDAPAH,
10th May.

HONORED SIR,

For urgent reasons of domestic importance, I leave tonight for my village. I request casual leave for seven days. Begging pardon for leaving station before leave is granted. But my work is urgent and I have not taken leave these three years."

Your most obedient servant,
R. RAMACHANDRAN.

CHAPTER XVIII

A CURTAIN LECTURE

TO know what caused Ramu's letter to Mr. Cadell, we should go back a little. When Mr. and Mrs. Cadell were discoursing on high problems, at about the same time Janaki and Ramu were engaged in debating on vital issues of great moment to them. Ramu was sullen and strong of accent but it was the calm before the storm. And it did break indeed.

"I am getting tired of this life, dear Janaki." Ramu opened the topic with unusual decision in his voice, "I am going to resign this petty, touring menial job and go back to my village. It is three years since I have had a bath in flowing water or even seen a running river. This arid waste is like myself. Like the Pennar, my life is one stretch of sand and no water, many months in the year. There's no chance of promotion for three years to come. I must resist your mother. Dear Janaki, you must side with me—you are good by yourself but you have grown like the *veppa* tree under the banyan, shade-struck and feeble-minded. Your mother is—"

"That is impossible, dear," returned Janaki with terror and trouble in her eyes, "on the other hand, mother suggests your going to the village to raise a loan of one thousand rupees, if it is not possible to sell the lands. Mother has incurred debts locally to the extent of five hundred rupees. Otherwise how could we have lived on twenty-five rupees per mensem these three years? And you don't know how to make extra income which every camp clerk does."

"Impossible, equally impossible, Janaki. Your mother knows that there is already upon the land a loan of one thousand, borrowed for my college education. We have not been able to pay interest on it these five years."

"Then, dear, all the more reason, as mother says, that a bigger loan should be raised and the matter ended. Dear, you should see the world as others see it, or I fear we shall go to the wall—"

"Impossible, Janaki, you are speaking madness with your mother. I will not sell an inch of land, ancestral for seven generations, even if I die like a pariah dog for want of food. The whole evil is in your mother—gay, expensive and ambitious and at this time of her life! You are also somewhat like her—at any rate easily led. And I am weak and miserable, idealistic and unhappy. Why should we sweat in a foreign land for a pittance that would not cover even the cost of your gorgeous clothing—while in our little village nourished

by the sacred river, all of us can be free and happy with our one *veli* of land, one cocoanut garden and our faithful Murugan ? The small debt with which my mother encumbered the land for my B.A., may be slowly wiped out along with my knowledge of English. Janaki, with you by my side, the village is to me a little paradise, but alas—"

"We tried it all once dear," said Janaki.

"That was three years ago, but now, as Murugan then said, the lands are doubly fertile as a result of the floods. They yield in plenty. The Collector is a harsh, hard man, though good and kind in his own way. I have got ready my resignation letter and I will send it now. Let your mother burst. I will not be bullied by her any longer."

The door opened and Janaki's mother, who had overheard the conversation, stepped in a little to the right of her daughter and broke out in a commanding and firm voice, "Sir, you always think and talk like a little child that has not yet been weaned, which thinks its mother's bosom a little paradise. Look at your neighbour. He is not even a matriculate. Within ten years of service, he is a Sub-Magistrate with pomp and power. Even if he does not stir you, my words and poor Janaki's plight must. We are slaving these three years within the kitchen and without, with no servant to help us, and poor Janaki's palm is as rough with work as that of a maid-servant. Have you no pity for her ? Look

at Kamalam, your neighbour's wife—the daughter of a poor priest—look at her now, her clothes and jewels, her peacock gait. She sits idle all day on the verandah and lords it over everyone as if she were the Sub-Magistrate. She never touches the broom-stick to which my darling is always wedded."

Ramu tried in vain to interrupt the magic flow of words.

"I scorn to be a slave to work. You must put us higher up. Beg or force or bribe your way through. Think no more of your wretched, factious and swampy village, now all in ruins. Sell your poor lands there and forget your village and cut the cord that still fetters you. Bring cash in hand. I will help you to force your way through. Poor Janaki refuses to be the wife of a wandering camp-clerk. The other boy, who begged her hand is now a Vakil with a gig and a gong, minting money as fast as seconds go."

Ramu tried again to speak, but Meenakshi continued with a wave of her left hand.

"You must act and not philosophise. Shed your college bred docility and convictions. All idealism is cowardice. To seek to do justice to others is only to do injustice to oneself. Lack of ambition like the want of red corpuscles in the blood is a disease. Plain living is the motto of all poor and feeble men. Tadpoles breed and thrive only in stagnant water. Rural life is the refuge of the weak and the ignorant even as the village pond

is the nursing place of low life, like toads and snails. Discard it and work hard. Dream of success by day and night, and for a Deputy Collectorship, and you will soon have it. And, I tell you, it is worth having. You will know it one day and feel thankful for my hard words just now."

Words and ideas came ashore like wrecked cargo, thrown on the beach by a raging sea. Ramu stood mind-swept in the storm.

Meenakshi left the room immediately but her rich and firm voice still rang within and in Ramu's brains. It was after this philosophic curtain lecture that Ramu tore up his resignation letter and wrote the one to Mr. Cadell.

CHAPTER XIX

THE WORM IN THE BUD

MEANWHILE Murugan was happy in his little cocoanut garden. He was becoming increasingly prosperous. He followed the advice of his young master and saved money. His wife made an excellent partner. Indeed Ponni and Murugan made the cocoanut *tope* a little paradise on earth, and it was the envy of the whole village. Murugan often thought of his master.

"Ponni, it is three years since I have seen the face of my master. He is now-a-days not even regular in writing. We owe it all to him—our peace and joy," said Murugan with a deep sigh of gratitude.

"Yes, dear, but the village people are envious of our prosperity and independence."

"It's but natural, Ponni, but if we conduct ourselves with extra humility for some time, the feeling will pass away," Murugan advised, and changed the topic. "Ponni let us see where we are. How much we have saved these three years. Five hundred rupees by hard-work, and this pair of bulls are worth another hundred. But the pity is we

have to bury this wealth, for we *pannayals,* tillers of the soil, can neither buy land nor lend our money for interest. That will awaken the jealousy and the spite of the village and the big men will cry us out and even confiscate our hundreds as stolen wealth."

"Yes, dear," Ponni put in with a bewitching smile, "if only we could own this little garden for ourselves and for ever, what a dream life would be for us! We will live the plainest, the simplest and happiest folk in the land—"

"It is a sin, Ponni, to covet our own master's land. Look around. No *pallee* or *padayachi* owns an acre of land, nor does he know where his food for the morrow will come from. The whole system is at fault. He who tills the soil has no interest in it. He is simply hired for the day and the job, though he is kept on for ever like this from one generation to another. We are now prosperous because we are now lessees and the land yields double what it did before. If the tiller of the soil is the owner of it as well, life would everywhere be happy. But he who owns it, cares not to till it himself for he owns more than he needs for his own wants. It is a pity and an evil thing, but man is strangely dual and it's not for me to preach. Look yonder. Who is it that is coming up towards us in haste. It is the *Talayari* and not the postman—the *Talayari* is a bird of evil omen. Let us see."

Murugan stepped out of the garden to meet the visitor, who was the village watchman.

"Muruga, your flashy days are numbered. Your master has come today and sends for you at once. Already strange rumours are afloat."

"What are they?"

"Learn them yourself and feel a little more troubled. Your flashy days are over if Dame Rumour is no lying jade—," and without caring to finish the threat he brandished his long pole, the symbol of his village police power, and quickly went away along the fields.

CHAPTER XX

THERE IS A HIDDEN JUSTICE IN THE WHOLE AFFAIR

MURUGAN left his cottage with a trembling and a grateful heart, to meet his master and cheer his eyes now wet with fear and joy. Before he had gone a short distance, he sighted his master Ramu. They entered the cocoanut *tope* together.

"My eyes are wet with tears of joy to see my Swami again. But why in the name of God is Swami both silent and sad?"

"Because, Muruga, I am no more your Swami. I am only a camp clerk driven abroad from home in the wake of vile ambition—not even mine own but that of others. You are no more my lessee. I have sold my acres to Periaswamy Iyar just now. But I have not yet sold this garden, though even this I must."

Ramu paused for breath and began again, "By a superior right, this garden is yours—in the eyes of God. You have been here nine generations—longer than I. This was a barren flat once. Your father laboured at it and reared

this garden—from cocoanut to seedling, from seedling to the young plant, from the plant to the tree. He nourished it with greater care than your mother nourished you. It is all yours by a higher law, but man is weak and wants money for even returning things not his own. Dear Muruga, the village tells me that you have saved a treasure —and I am proud of you. Give me that, however small it is. I will transfer this garden to your name and make you the owner—nay this very evening."

Murugan looked sad and puzzled at this philosophy and warmth, and at the discovery of his treasure and its fatal consequences.

"Swami I am not so ungrateful as to—Swami is testing me. A poor tiller of the soil—has he a treasure? It is the mischief and the jealousy of the village—all to ruin me—"

"No, Muruga. You have not understood me yet. I am not to plunder you. You need hide nothing from me. You are an honest, fine fellow. I am serious and true. Give me some money. Even for a nominal price, I will sell this garden to you. Ponni, you too are silent. Are you afraid to speak the truth before your master. I am proud of your industry and thrift and I will accept even five hundred, though this garden may be worth thrice the sum—will you not tell me, Ponni?—"

Murugan and Ponni eyed each other and in an united voice, cried out, "Here are all our savings put in an earthen pot below the very roots of the

tree on which Swami is standing. It contains five hundred rupees of bright silver. It is your money, Swami, in a real sense. Take it in your hour of need but do not sell an acre of land or this garden. What is Murugan if not a loyal servant in the hour of need of his master? But don't sell an acre of land which has passed seven times from father to son."

"Muruga, this fine talk is all too late, many hours as well as years too late. I have sold even the house. It is finished. If this beautiful garden at least can be left in your hands, it will please me. It is your father's work and your own. I will add to it as my own gift the adjacent one *mah* of wet land. It will yield you twenty-five *kalams* of paddy, enough for the year, under your honest toil. This cocoanut garden will give you all the necessaries and fifteen rupees a month. If you have the mind, both of you may lead a godly life—"

"But the whole village—" Murugan interposed.

"Don't mind the village. Be honest and non-interfering. You will be safe and happy. I will sign the deed today and you should hasten with me to the Registration office—for I must fly back to my post in twenty-four hours and my casual leave is heavy and fleeting like the hours of a condemned prisoner--Ponni and Muruga, I wish you both an honest and chaste life, simple, free and joyous—the homely rewards of industry and thrift."

Ramu continued his words of farewell in a changed voice, " But remember me, Muruga, when you drink a tender cocoanut—and remember that I, while young, and my mother alive, careless of the world, played together and drank together with you. I am educated and I must leave the village to earn elsewhere. Society compels me to be its slave. You grew this garden by your own toil. You must enjoy it in your own right. Good—there is some hidden justice in the whole affair. Make haste. Don't weep. Muruga, I must join duty in twenty-four hours. Be not worried at an accent of sorrow in my voice or a flitting shadow in my face. They are due to causes too deep for you. I am now thinking for the whole world—make haste, Muruga."

CHAPTER XXI

THE RIVER SCENE AT ALAVANTI

WHILE Ramu was talking with Murugan, the village was not idle about his affairs. The bathing ghat in the morning at the Cauvery focussed and mirrored as usual the heart and thought of the fair sex of the Alavanti elite. The women folk lorded the South Indian rivers. The men were rather insignificant in the river though they might be powerful at home and in the fields. The men quietly bathed, said their *mantrams* with varying degrees of speed and ran home to work. But the women enjoyed their holi-hour. The gentle stream in summer was clear as crystal, cool and refreshing, and set free the tongue as nothing else could.

"Did you hear the latest news," cried the middle-aged lady who was once a belle, undraping herself with ease and caution to the minimum bath dress, and dipping with freedom and grace up to the neck, her surplus many colored sari making buoys in the flowing water, "Ramu has sold even his house to Periaswami Iyar."

"What about his fields?" asked another, "my husband wants to purchase his *nathangal* and

watched the course of events for Ramu these many years."

"He has sold everything to Periaswami Iyar," she replied laconically.

"What a pity! my husband is away now—is it too late?"

"Quite too late? but the worst news is that he is going to sell the beautiful garden to Murugan. Murugan is a lucky fellow but his head will be turned."

"Lucky days for *Pallees* and *Padayachis* and bad ones for Brahmins. That will turn Murugan's head and make him more conceited. Already so many are jealous of him and he is now becoming unpopular. Why does a *padayachi* or *palli* wants to own lands?"

"Here comes Sita, an expert in Ramu's affairs. Let us ask her," said the middle-aged lady. "People say that she also writes to Ramu secretly and that Ramu also writes to her."

"Why, it was rumoured strongly three years ago, that they met in the temple on the farewell day, and talked so close and well together that they could not but have kissed each other. The Sudra boy who lights the oil-lamps swears he saw them talking."

"But it is all scandal against two such pure and innocent souls. Sita is above suspicion; we have never heard a tale about her till now, these seven years," protested another who never encouraged

extreme gossip on the river side and who thought that even river-talk had its limits.

"Anyhow her luck is very much better now. She is blessed with a boy, so what does it matter if her husband has again gone back to his old ways. She consoles herself with her son."

"What are you talking about me in murmured tones and tell-tale eyes," said Sita who now reached the water's edge and knew with that rare instinct of a woman that the talk was about her.

"Nothing but that you are lucky in being blessed with such a fine lad."

Sita was proud of the compliment. She left the child to play on the sand and took a hurried bath.

"But why are you sad today Sita?" asked one, with a mischievous smile on her lips.

"Because Ramu is selling all his ancestral lands and finally bidding good-bye to the village. Who would not regret a co-villager quitting his home for ever, and that too so fine and gentle a soul as Ramu?"

Sita did not want to excite a general conversation on the subject but finished her hurried bath, silent and absorbed in her own thoughts, and was soon on her way back to her house.

Ramu was just then returning from the garden with Murugan. He and Sita met on the way. Each within thanked God. How she longed to speak with her tongue! How he longed to greet her with her soft hands in

his! But custom forbade either. But their eyes and souls met and spoke more eloquently. Sita seemed, with her light *sari* the more diaphanous for being wet, fresh and lovely like a plantain flower not yet plucked from the tree. Ramu thought he saw her through and through—her heart bubbling with red love.

But the lad greeted Ramu truly and well to his mother's heart's content. He put forth his infant arms eagerly and greeted the stranger in words jibbered as only a child of three knows how to jibber—meaningless yet so full of meaning. The mother was overjoyed.

Ramu asked Murugan, "Muruga, is it Sita's boy?"

Sita heard the enquiring words.

"Yes, Swami, a pretty lad of three to comfort her now. Her husband has again fallen back into old vices and ways. But her mother-in-law is dead now and Sita is the mistress of the home."

But Ramu seemed scarcely to hear him but continued to gaze lovingly with a lingering eye on the moving figure with the child, whom he had purposely allowed to overtake him. Ramu was seized with a strange longing to visit Sita boldly at her house on this his final farewell day at Alavanti, let custom and propriety go to the dogs, and to dine with her as indeed he would be entitled to as a poor brahmin in a rich lady's house for a day. He thought it over again, the rapid impulse of a

moment. But he resolved to leave the village at once without his mid-day meal, his thirst unslaked and hunger unappeased but both lost in his dream of Sita. Ramu was absorbed in many thoughts and memories. The temple meeting burned low at a distance like a bush-fire on the heath. And every footfall sounded the farewell to the village of his birth till he reached the tank on the west where he washed his feet in the cool water.

Murugan silently followed his master, himself wrapped in a different reverie not knowing whether he only dreamt or was awake. The beautiful cocoanut garden, the most coveted thing in Alavanti was it to become his own ? Impossible, a day dream !

CHAPTER XXII

A REBIRTH

When Ramu washed the dust of Alavanti off his feet in the village tank on the west, he felt a world-change coming over him—a new birth and a new feeling. He felt a strange liberation. He lived no more for himself. He lived for the world. A Sanyasin spirit seized him, a passionless ardour for work. He resolved to labour like an anchorite living on spring water and herbs. A strange renaissance kindled his being.

His doubts and difficulties were over. His education in life and letters was over. He must only give out a hundredfold what he took in. Work had a newer joy and meaning for him. Truth dawned on him with many facets one after the other, like stars in the eastern sky when the obscuring and mundane orb of power, splendour and possession has set. Ramu at last found his sheet-anchor in the tossed and drifting waters of life—by cutting the cable, for perilous it is to be tethered in a stormy sea.

And Meenakshi's words were strangely true. The village fetter was cut. The sense of possession,

native to life and in which the ills of life are rooted, was cut. From a moping child of Alavanti clinging like a banyan-shoot to its native soil round the mother stem, he became a citizen of the world to scatter pell-mell through earth, air and water, the seeds of a new race raised on new ideas.

The monsoon that descends so well and fair on land has its agonised birth on the sea. Ramu had passed the travail-agony and hung meekly waiting for the howling wind of Fate to scatter the rain-bearing clouds over hills and dales, over fields and towns, over land and water, renewing life everywhere by a magic touch that is still a secret with the gods.

CHAPTER XXIII

KEDARI'S FIRST BRIEF

WE long forgot Kedari. But Madras did not and could not. These years were no less eventful to him. Kedari passed his B.L. only in the third class. Fortune tricked with him this time. He felt it very much, though he went about lightly bragging that only third class B.L.'s became the leaders of the bar, instancing Mr. B. Markandam Iyar and a host of others. But Mr. B. Markandam Iyar had no vivid recollection of his own academic rank in B.L., for a good bank account discourages retrospective memories of one's own past. He considerably cooled in his admiration for Kedari. Apart from the third class, he had his own reasons.

Mr. B. Markandam Iyar had his own epigrams, neither poetical nor philosophical but adequate and incisive for purposes of legal success. He used to say, in warfare, love and vakiling, be neither just nor unjust, neither generous nor ungenerous, in an accent and manner that almost recalled some of the celebrated passages in the Bhagavad-Gita. In pursuance of some such instinctive recipes for

self-protection, he nodded dissent to the smart and ambitious Kedari when he applied to join his office.

But Kedari was equal to the occasion. By a delightful mixture of audacity, toadyism and threat—a combination against which all great men abjectly yield—and on an unexpressed understanding that he would play an active drum to the small but efficient virtues of his "boss," Kedari was admitted as an apprentice into the office of Mr. B. Markandam Iyar in spite of the third class B.L. and the traditions of his office. For Mr. B. Markandam had a salutary rule that only first class B.L.'s should be admitted to his office, for he knew well that the first in college drew the last prize in the world—thank God the University ground them so well and fine.

Kedari was now one year old in the profession. Life seemed a great disappointment even for one of his optimistic nature. Mr. B. Markandam Iyar, the leader whom he generously invited to the Moot Club as the President, was a far different being from the leader of the bar within the quadrangle of the High Court. He was a metamorphosed figure in the office and in the Court. He was busy and serious. His address was curt and the treatment was even rough. He did not single out Kedari from the crowd of university-starred mediocrities who devilled in his office with the patience of asses for the food and raiment of impounded cattle. All these, to the juvenile

exuberance and optimistic nature of Kedari, were a great disappointment.

What puzzled him more was the strange duality of his "boss". Whatever Kedari was, his complexity admitted of no duality. He could be profound and intricate but never double. But Mr. B. Markandam Iyar was deep with the depth of success. If he seemed somewhat rigid and unscrupulous while in court, he wiped out the ill-graces of the day, by his charming *bonhomie* in the relaxed hours of the evening, though his camel-like physiognomy did not easily allow the change of mantle.

Mr. B· Markandam was gay and convivial on the Marina, the sea wiping out all the inequalities of life. He would even pat Kedari on the back, pinch his ears—he had read Abbot's Napoleon—and tenderly feel his beardless chin by way of affirming his youth and preaching patience! But all this affection outside court hours brought no grist to Kedari's mill. Kedari's insolvent hours were most annoying to Kokilam.

For Kedari, inspired by the maxim that nothing succeeds like success, set up a decent home with Kokilam, renting a neat little house in the Nadu Street at Mylapore. The Nadu Street had neither the aristocratic traditions of the Luz (thirty years old) nor the present opulence of the Tank Square. Nor was it squalid like Mandaveli in which unambitious souls dwelt, nor dirty like the Bazar quarters. But it was in a central position

and struck a golden mean. In fact Nadu Street, though narrow just now, opened out into the Tank Square which ultimately led one to the riches and the repose of the Luz. Kedari in the Nadu Street was the most real rendering of the facts and ideals of his life in terms of residential quarters.

The apprentice year he really enjoyed, for it was the first year with Kokilam—a year of real apprenticeship in many things that matter in life. But even during this one year of rest and happiness, he did not slacken his work. After his enrolment as a High Court Vakil, he redoubled his energy and began to lay truly and well the foundations of his career. He worked hard at the digest with the limited vision and singleness of purpose of an underground labourer. He did not fail to attend a single case of importance argued by his master and created an atmosphere of success even in cases he lost, by strenuous praises without and well-laid smiles and head-shakings within Court.

Would virtue ever go without its reward ? Kedari hoped that the lapse of unpaid months would but consolidate the final dividend into a handsome cheque. One year passed on and it remained only a hope. Was Mr. B. Markandam Iyar insensible of these kind offices of Kedari ? In fact, even his clients began to notice the forwardness of this junior. Mr. B. Markandam also had generally a kind and generous heart and he wanted to help Kedari in due time on a proper occasion. The

utmost kindness he could show him for the present, he resolved should take some such form as the following. Just a week before the re-opening, meeting Kedari on the beach sands, he greeted him, " Don't be discouraged, Kedari, I waited three years for my first brief. Persevere and there is success—for talents like yours. Write to friends in the moffusil. You may state you are working in my office. Self-help. That's the way to get on. I waited three years and I am now called a success." He finished with an obliging smile at the end.

Kedari returned home dejected, for it was the death-knell of his hope.

"Dear, why are you, very moody to-day," asked Kokilam.

"Nothing, did you ask your uncle ?" inquired Kedari.

"What for ?"

"The loan."

"Yes. He was here just now. He has no money. He can't oblige us further, now or hereafter," replied Kokilam.

"There is none else to turn to—" lamented Kedari.

"Once you had a good friend who ever helped you. But you have neglected him these years—Ramu you have treated with ingratitude—."

"I am feeling so now, don't press that point hard, dear. The Law College has hardened me and the profession will make me harder yet—a

piece of metal or stone. Our great Vakils are, like our images of gods, made of stone. My boss proposes to keep me alive with words."

"Why should he do otherwise? I always told you so. But you were telling me that he was very kind and will bless you with a cheque for a lump sum one day with which you would gag my taunting mouth."

"Indeed, I thought so, Kokilam. You are right. Nothing comes to us as a gift--even as hire for labour done, unless compelled. My boss does not even seem to think that a junior has a stomach, a noiseless engine much livelier, more kicking and more hungry than his high grade Rolls Royce—on which he spends three hundred a month."

"But, that is the way of the world! do you, dear, think of people below you, much less of the ways and means of their stomachs?"

"You are right, Kokilam. It is a home-thrust and well-deserved. Do I think of Ramu and his rare kindness? But if repentance can cure me, I will pray from today."

Ere he could finish, he heard steps ascending.

"Someone is coming," said Kokilam and retired.

"I hope it is not the third creditor for the day—would the great Lord of the seven hills at Tirupathi make him my first client," humbly prayed Kedari within.

"Is Mr. Kedari. B.A., B.L., High Court Vakil, here?"

"Yes," replied Kedari.

"Where is he? I should like to see him."

"I am he," meekly replied Kedari, fetching in a cane chair and asking the rich-looking stranger to be seated. Periaswamy Iyar was taken aback at the youth and the simple residence of Kedari, which ill-fitted his own preconceived notions of a Madras Vakil and the fervid descriptions of Ramu.

"Mr. Ramachandran of Alavanti, your friend and classmate, has sent me to you. Here is the letter of introduction."

"Is it Ramu of Alavanti?"

"Yes."

"Where is Ramu now?"

"He is now a camp clerk at Cuddapah."

"Camp clerk at Cuddapah!" echoed Kedari.

"He sold all his village lands to me last week."

"Sold all his lands!" asked Kedari with a slightly alarmed voice.

"Yes."

"I must write to him and enquire. It is long since we have met each other," he added with a rather pompous air, just to impress his client, and dismissed Ramu with that word of future action.

Kedari began to survey the client with the potential and eager looks of a young bird of prey, timidly circling in air on its first flight for food. And Periaswamy Iyar was no easy quarry for a vulture-ling. He was corpulent, orthodox and rich.

His mere fatness was a welcome indication of deposits of clinking gold in his purse. He was intellectual. He talked well. So much the better for Kedari. He could show that he had an enterprising and ambitious head on his young shoulders. He put forth his best powers. He talked with the pent-up energy and failure of years on its trial for once. Periaswamy was impressed. Kedari did not let go his first client. He won. He received a crisp one hundred rupee note with tremuluous joy. He chuckled within himself that he did not wait three years for his first case like Mr. B. Markandam Iyar.

"Do you think a senior is necessary in this case?"

"Not quite necessary, at this stage," boldly replied Kedari.

Periaswamy yielded to the energetic wishes of this young man. Kedari sent Periaswamy Iyar away with a decorous and pleased kindness whose full joy he did not dare reveal to him. The steps had hardly died on the road and the burly figure passed from the window-view, when, hurrying from within, Kedari cried, "Come, Kokilam, here is a hundred rupee note—the tide has now turned—it means ten ten-rupee notes, changed into fives twenty five-rupee notes, into bright silver one hundred rupees that will fetch peace of mind for a month, my first fee. It is the first pebble in the pond —not a small one, for aught I know. My reputation

will go rippling wider and wider and bring me more men and more money—and more flies will walk into my parlour. You, Kokilam, will like me better then, will you not ?"

"Pray, dear, write a letter of thanks to Ramu."

"Then, you overheard the conversation. It's an evil practice,"

"but not for a first brief. Pray write to Ramu. But for him, you would not have got it," pleaded Kokilam with eyes wet with joy and gratitude.

"Yes, yes, I will. I know my duty if you would but hold your tongue, ever prating about Ramu. Poor man, he has sold his lands and is now only a camp clerk—that means perhaps only twenty-five rupees a month and a low life of menial service."

Kedari murmured assent but the will stood weaker especially after Kokilam's request. A sort of pride which Kedari himself did not understand fully but felt, tormented him. He thought that a letter of thanks from a High Court Vakil to a camp clerk for a brief though a first one was a little strange.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE WAYS OF PROVIDENCE

MEENAKSHI'S fervid eloquence, as we saw, had decided results. She achieved in an evening her object of many years. But the emotion and the eloquence brought on her malarial fever the same night on which Ramu left for Alavanti. And a day after his return to Cuddapah she expired, her mind agitated even in the fatal delirium with prating words of ambition and prophecy. Now that she was no more, Ramu began to feel her loss. His feminine nature needed all the masculine piloting of Meenakshi. And Janaki was but a graceful edition of himself. Ramu felt like a creeper, cut from its hold and dangling in mid-air. Janaki entwined with him only added to the weight and sense of loneliness.

Ramu spent the little that he had saved from the sale of his lands on the funeral obsequies of Meenakshi. And after paying off sundry debts, he found himself worth only three hundred rupees in this wide world, a year's salary put together. Therefore, though Meenakshi was no more, he could neither revert to his village, nor give up the job in which

he had already unconsciously invested three years of strenuous and pensionable service.

" Be comforted, dear child. It is God's will. All is for our good. That at the moment her wishes are realised, she should be no more—it is pity but it is God's wish. Let us bow meekly to it. I feel her presence only after her death. Now we are alone. I will tell the Collector, that hereafter the camp clerkship will not suit me. I must and will be with you for ever, dear Janaki—."

" Dear, I can't be alone. You must be with me always—." Janaki sobbed like a child.

" Doubt it not. I will make it plain boldly to the Collector. I am no more a camp clerk. The order is made in my mind—."

" Someone is coming," said Janaki.

" It is the Collector's duffadar, rather a strange visitor—a very unusual thing. Evidently the Collector is wroth with me for this long leave and sends me an ultimatum—to join duty or——."

The duffadar handed him a letter which Ramu read.

CUDDAPAH,

August, 7.

DEAR MR. RAMACHANDAR,

May I offer you our sincere condolence on your recent bereavement? My wife and I are touched in a special degree by any misfortune that befalls you.

But you should not drift into moody ways but get back to work and life again. By way of helping you, we desire to invite you and your wife for tea to-morrow morning. We have some things to tell you. I trust that the bereavement is not too recent, to forbid your accepting a small private function.

Yours sincerely,

H. CADELL.

" It is a rare honour, Janaki, the Collector and his wife inviting us to tea. You will not come but I shall go. The note is so civil and courteous—."

CHAPTER XXV

A RARE HONOUR

THE REV. MR. G. CRAIG, the great educationist of Southern India, who had devoted his talents and life for over a quarter of a century to the spread of English education as a professor of English and Philosophy in the Madras Christian College, was a brother of Mrs. Cadell. He was a strict disciplinarian but a compassionate and catholic Scotch Missionary who had no race prejudice. He was on a visit to Cuddapah to see his sister. It finally led to the tea party to which Ramu was invited.

"Well, George, what sort of boy was Ramachandar at College—you gave him a good certificate—do you remember?" asked Mr. Cadell.

"Frankly I must tell you, Henry," replied Mr. Craig, "I don't quite remember him. He could not have been one of our best boys—for I remember all of them. You know our difficulties. The classes are nearly three hundred strong. Only the brilliant or the pushing or the ultra social boys who attend our 'at homes' are remembered by us—."

"Are you sure they are the only ones worth remembering?"

"Not at all. But how can one help it? I rather think that the brightest boys are in some respects the poorest on the character side, lacking humility and gentility. If I see Ramachandran, I shall certainly recognise him by face and tell you—."

"You will find in him, George, one of the gentlest and most unassuming souls," warmly assured Mrs. Cadell. "He is a truer Christian than many among us. He is cultured and quiet. Well, the mere fact that he has kept on for three years as camp clerk here is enough testimony to his worth."

Mr. Cadell laughed broadly. Meanwhile Ramu was seen approaching, a little shyly and haltingly.

"Oh! yes," cried Mr. Craig. "I know him, remember him quite well. He is known to the whole College from the peon to the Principal by one single episode. He paid at the counter one day one hundred rupee note for change into tens and he was paid wrongly ten fifties. The office found out the mistake late in the evening when checking accounts but could not trace in the crowd to whom the wrong payment had been made. Quietly next morning at ten—he found out the mistake only late in the night—Ramachandran came to the office and paid back the extra four hundred to the delight of all—especially the poor account clerk. I remember now. I gave him a good certificate—."

"But you never said a word there about his brains!" exclaimed Mr. Cadell.

"For, I never knew anything at all about it. He was always a shy, reserved back-bencher, and never attended any 'at home' or College social function—he failed also in the B.A. I think—."

"Now you will have a chance of knowing him, and regretting to what a deserving boy you have not awarded the B.A. degree. He is a close student of Life and Politics and good at Literature. He is a keen observer and has a gentle humour and a lofty mind that lifts everything that it touches—" said Mrs. Cadell—and seeing her husband smile at her, "even Henry discusses with him Indian conditions off and on—"

Ramu meanwhile joined the party. Though he knew that he was being talked about, he could not make out the drift. He was surprised to see the Rev. Mr. Craig who stood up and greeted Ramu warmly with a handshake to which he shyly responded, while Mr. Cadell surrounded himself in the lounge with a cloud of smoke energetically puffed from his cigars in two minutes.

"Rev. Mr. Craig, my old Master?"

"Not quite old yet, Ramachandran, won't you sit down? You can't drink tea standing?"

"I was telling your Collector about you."

"I thought you never knew me well enough to remember me—"

"But there is one episode which makes us never forget your face?"

"You mean the currency note affair?"

"Yes."

"But I wonder, what was remarkable about it? It was a common piece of honesty. By your celebrating it like this, as if it were a rare thing for an Indian to do, you do us an injustice. Every boy would act likewise—"

"But, Ramachander, my experience is not like that—" said Mr. Craig.

"My experience is worse," emphatically declared Mr. Cadell.

"Because, you don't encourage or befriend the right sort of people or boys. You cheer up the pure intellectual and the adventurer. You characterise the morally minded as weak and sentimental or indolent and unfit. Your civilisation worships the intellect as an end in itself and not as a power subject to character or religion. That is the error at the bottom. The tools are chiselled and fine but the power behind is immoral and not at all humane—"

Ramu always found it difficult to talk Anglo-Saxon English or simple ideas before the ruling race. He wanted to impress and so Ramu spoke Johnsonese and reserved his Anglo-Saxon for his friends.

"It is a fine indictment, George. I told you so. It is heavy but a feather-weight hammer is

not the real thing for the purpose—" cried Mrs. Cadell in admiration.

"Well, Ramachandran," said Mr. Craig after a moment's thoughtful pause, "You are perhaps right. But how are we to get at real merit in a crowd of three hundred, if merit does not show its head to us but goes head down? It takes a long time and leisure—"

"Yes, that is the difficulty of all organised life. Its bulk increases and only hides the pearls at greater depths."

"We are soaring high, at any rate too high for me," exclaimed Mr. Cadell somewhat annoyed by the turbulent metaphors of Ramu which came tumbling down like rough pebbles in a hill-stream, "That is the pity when a teacher meets his student. Each talks like a book, which one has read and the other has not. Let us talk of simple things, our social life. East is East and West is West. How true it is. My dear, no use contradicting it. Look here, you sent an invitation to both Ramachander and his wife. He comes alone. Evidently he could not persuade his wife to attend this tea-party. How could there be social or friendly life between two such lots? Either we must rule as rulers or get back bag and baggage."

"No, the difficulties cannot be wiped out in a day, even if necessary. Again, our view on social matters is so fundamentally different—" pleaded Ramu.

"The old, old, philosophic excuse," derided Mr. Cadell in a somewhat official tone.

Ramu was at the height of the talk and heeded it not but addressing Mrs. Cadell and Mr. Craig went on, "You ask for certain conditions as the first requisite of social life but don't do the needful to educate the people in that sense for which they never cared till now. I believe in female education. Our women had a kind of it till now, not fed by letters or books but full of it in a natural way as a spring is full of bubbling water."

"But how could you aspire for full citizenship or Swaraj when things are yet so unripe on your own admission—?" asked Mr. Cadell with a voice that seemed to conclude the answer at any rate for himself.

"For they can never ripen without Swaraj. We can never learn to swim without getting into water."

"It is the old, old metaphor, good for argument but never good for the solid and difficult science of Government. See, George, what a humane Collector I make. What equality and freedom of speech I give my camp clerk. That is the utmost we can do for deserving Indians. Still, even a man like Ramachander is so shy and timid and does not take freedom and equality as naturally as we take it."

"For, how can I forget you have a pistol up your sleeve levelled to my ears? My education, Mr. Craig, has taken me from my ancestral

calling—the simple joy of the plough which is as natural to me as water is to plants—my lot by birth is neither to rule nor to obey—both are unnatural to me and must be so to all thinking men. My College education has cost me my economic independence for it has wiped out my ancestral estate. And it is so academic that I am fit only to drive a clerical pen and quote in its trail a line of Shelley or of Shakespeare. I wonder not if I am but a slave!

"The fault is you have shaped our education to serve a definite end, clerkship in Government. The higher aspects are ignored. This narrow gorge holds back the whole flood-water of youth. It stagnates behind and ferments. The Indian unrest is but this, widen the sluice and free the stagnant waters,—they will go down and fertilise the plains not only of India but of the whole world."

Mr. Cadell dozed during the later part of the theme, but both Mrs. Cadell and Mr. Craig raptly heard him. Both felt they were not in power—not the chosen engineers to dynamite the little rocks that impeded the water-way. At any rate, Mr. Craig felt that he was rather a worker in the upper hills, pouring more water down the valley into the overcharged lake. Mrs. Cadell thought she was only the gate-keeper's wife and would never be heard on questions not within her portfolio. Ramu felt himself small and weak and his idealism in vain. He fell into a gentle murmur to himself. "So, the world is ruled. And when the deluge

comes we stand aghast for a minute in a repentant mood. But when the floods have gone, our repentance ceases. We are not a whit the wiser. But we begin again on the same narrow lines, again building a prison for the world's greatest spirits and a palace for its rats and mice."

The night was already dark when the party broke up indifferently and in silence after a desultory talk, and Ramu trudged his way home wrapped in a double melancholy, personal and universal.

Janaki greeted him, "Dear, did you ask the Collector?"

"No, the occasion was not apt."

"Oh! Then you will continue as a camp clerk and keep me alone. If the tea table was not apt for a favour, what other time will be more favourable?"

Janaki wept bitterly like a child and Ramu tried to comfort her, "No, No, I will ask positively to-morrow at office. Englishmen don't like to mix up tea with a favour. I will do it in office tomorrow."

Next morning the Duffadar came again with another letter. Ramu flung a rupee and his upper cloth to him and rushed to Janaki with the glad tidings that he was appointed a Deputy Tahsildar; on one hundred and fifty rupees a month at Dusi near Conjeevaram and that Mr. Cadell himself would go to Madras as a member of the Board of Revenue.

CHAPTER XXVI

A COUNTRY MOUSE VISITS A TOWN RAT

MURUGAN was now a *Mirasdar, i.e.*, a landholder of the village of Alavanti. Though the evolution of Murugan was comparatively slow, from the tiller of the soil to the lessee, from the lessee to the owner, more as a reward of virtue from a discerning master than as pure luck, the once popular but poor Murugan had now his own enemies in plenty both among his clansmen and the Mirasdars of the village. But Murugan put up with everything with patience and humility.

Thoppai was the first to congratulate Murugan on his new position of independence. Out of sheer gratitude and his touching loyalty and also by way of celebrating his newly acquired dignity of an owner, Murugan took Thoppai into his own service more as a friend and lieutenant than as a mere servant.

"Dear," Ponni pleaded in vain, "how could you forget your own philosophy that the owner of the soil should be its own tiller. Besides Thoppai is such a rash and reckless young man that he will surely bring ruin upon us by antagonising the

village landholders. And he is given up to toddy-drinking—"

"Dear Ponni, you talk like a woman. Really there is work for two people in this big garden and then it would bring four times the income. It is selfish for one man to do it all himself and shut out another. It will never please God. Again, poor fellow, he is sturdy and loyal and quite devoted to me. He is poor and has no one else. Suppose, Ponni, he was your brother, would you turn him away? In my life-time I never turned out a guest either openly or by hint. Thoppai will get seasoned in course of time even as his youth and town-bred views mellow. You don't know the resources of Thoppai. He is a spirited, educated fellow and can invoke the aid of the Sircar against the malevolents who are plotting our ruin. He is a god-send to us. Should we reject him? Reject fortune itself? No, never in the name of compassion, fellow feeling and self-interest—".

Murugan paused a moment.

"Ponni, look to your children and the kitchen work and don't bother yourself with these early prejudices against a kindly fellow."

Ponni was silenced and she meekly fell back to her work. Thoppai became a regular member of the family and the inspiring genius.

Murugan remembered his noble master's words of warning and advice for many months. He kept on to the old path of industry and simplicity but with

diminishing faith in the same. Thoppai's influence and philosophy were powerful. For Murugan was getting without toil more money than he needed and he did not know what to do. From a loin-cloth he progressed to a decent four-cubit length, then from a single to a double 'dhoti,' then to a shirt and a turban. Then from cold rice to coffee and from a thatched roof to a tiled house. But when he got such nice clothing and riches, could he parade them decently in his own village which knew his birth? What harm was there, Murugan thought and Thoppai pleaded, in paying a visit or two to town friends, instead of rotting there in his own garden, like old cocoanut husks soaked in slushy ponds? He visited a cousin of his for the first time, at the town of Kumbakonam. He was an arrack shop and a toddy shop contractor. The urban cousin was very nice for he had already heard of his rural cousin's new riches. He was very kindly to Murugan and feasted him well on flesh and wine. Murugan drank the subtle poison for the first time and was happy beyond measure. His own little village never boasted a drink shop. So, he repeated his visits to the urban areas frequently at great expense and loss to himself and to the sorrow and alarm of Ponni who protested all in vain. Three such years rolled on.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE BLESSINGS OF GOVERNMENT

"COMRADE MURUGA," exclaimed Thoppai one day, "have you heard the latest news? The Abkari Commissioner is camping in the *illupai* tope with horses, tents and peons and all the inborn majesty of the *Sircar*. He has come on a mission to bring some little joy to the poor."

Thoppai after a pause looking around continued, "Herein lies a treasure of gold for you—not even buried but standing up, needing no digging, neither shovel nor spade—if you would but know how to use the tide that ever comes at least once to every man in life. I have a scheme for you, to become mighty rich—" he paused again eyeing the cocoanut trees with a tender gaze.

"But Thoppai," Murugan began slowly, already a changed man with brain and industry enfeebled by drink and idleness, "we are already unpopular in the village. Periaswamy Iyer will simply stone us to death."

"Rich people will always stone poor people to death especially if they strive to become rich. It's

nothing new or strange. When you purchased this garden there was an equal storm of envy and indignation—"

He paused a moment and began "I know the ways of town. If you would but hear me, you can buy up the whole village in three years and less. Periaswami is in the throes of a heavy litigation. Vakils and vakils' clerks have good stomachs, thank God. I know town life. If but the appeal goes against him, his whole estate will come singing down for a few thousands. Meanwhile if you but make money and keep it ready—we can send away these tyrants out—the biggest first and the rest will follow—."

"But, Thoppai you are talking high and talking rebellion, grandiose schemes to become rich. My poor brains are enfeebled and I am old. To buy up the whole village—it is an ugly dream and a vile ambition,—impossible—."

"Dear Muruga, you are oldish and rural and the last fever has touched your native courage and commonsense. Leave it to me. I will manage. Lands are not worth anything when their masters are in trouble and there is no competition around. The *agraharam* is already stinking with the odour of decay. There's not a single fellow fit to keep his acre now. There was once one—that was your master, gentle Ramu. But the village drove him away and such a village in the eye of God deserves a general punishment—."

"Ten thousand will suffice and we can make it in three years if you but follow my way." Thoppai drove his point.

"Ten thousand rupees! how Thoppai? cocoanut leaves are not gold leaves."

"They are; if there is but a toddy shop in the village and you are its renter."

"I, the renter of a toddy shop—base and ignoble, Thoppai! The people will curse us."

"Nothing is base, which makes man earn an honest living from nature's own products, as town bred people do or say. Don't look for high justice or moral principles in money making. That is why the poor are always poor. They are morally so good and so wholesome—for the stomach of the rich. You are not an unmarried man like myself but have children whom you will have to provide for. Look at these windy, youthful, well-grown, succulent cocoanut trees. They are the only pagoda trees in this iron age, which you need not even shake. Just but gently tap them a little every day and gold flows like milk and honey—for you to gather. Even they seem but to nod assent to my words in the wind and offer their virgin love to me."

"Thoppai—my brains are hazy with your poetry and these visions of wealth you are sketching for me and my boys. To put it plainly you mean to say that we can draw toddy from these three hundred trees. If we get a toddy shop for the village—"

"And make five hundred rupees a month at least —ours is a populous village and round about there are many more and there is not one drink shop in ten miles square—five hundred rupees a month sure, a Collector's pay, and be the sole lord of this village in three years—at least to do good and justice to others, to our own clansmen, *pallees* and *padayachis*, the tillers of the soil. I have faith in you, Muruga, in your noble soul—"

"But people will curse us and the poor," hesitated Murugan again.

"They may, if they care to waste their breath in addition to their money, but a rich man can afford to turn a deaf ear to these cries of the poor, which can't touch a hair of the rich—Muruga, should I teach you the very lessons you have learnt in life. And again, when you become the master of the village, I swear these poor people whose interim curses you fear, will find in you a kinder and more generous master in the long run."

"Well, well, Thoppai, I can't argue with you. You had better act for me and do the needful. I am old and timid and belong to another generation. Everything is yours. You are my younger brother and you will have your share. May God bless you."

Thoppai being a man of action immediately left to see the Abkari Commissioner with a dozen tender cocoanuts as a present to the Saheb.

Meanwhile visions of Ramu floated down the eyes of Murugan. Ponni who overheard the

conversation came weeping to her lord. " Thoppai is an evil star, dear lord. He is an unmarried fellow and has no stake in this village. Follow not his advice, turn round and see, you have children—two sons and three daughters."

Ponni argued with Murugan, " Dear, pray, don't work for a toddy shop in our village, nor aspire to be its renter. You are already unpopular for several things. They now openly call you a drunkard. Pray, desist."

" Stupid Ponni," Murugan replied with careless assurance, " you know not why I work for a toddy shop—is it for me to get drunk ? I am not so much of a drunkard as you all seem to think. Labour in the field is not paying. Agriculture is a profession for the stupid and the poor. In towns, you don't know how people make money. If a toddy shop is now established in our village—as our Sircar is now trying to—I can easily become its renter. Then every cocoanut tree in this pretty garden, I tell you, dear Ponni, is worth its weight in gold. In three years you can make money and buy up the whole village and mock at these poor fellows at the plough."

Ponni wept hard but to no purpose.

CHAPTER XXVIII

FRIENDSHIP IS AN EVEN PLANK

MEANWHILE Kedari forged ahead. One evening the high grade Rolls-Royce car of Mr. B. Markandam Iyar drew up silently and majestically before the small but decent house of Kedari in the Nadu Street. Kokilam felt a thrill of joy at some distinguished arrival and peeped gently through the window. Kedari was just stepping down from the car with a grateful word and look of farewell which the small but mighty occupant within received with composed absent-mindedness. Kokilam instinctively knew that it must be the famous leader of the bar. She was not disappointed with the car. It was a magnificent thing.

The street was hardly sufficient for it and this was the first time that Kedari had been paid this compliment. He was still standing at the car with one foot on the board with a continuing look of grateful farewell, waiting for some response even of dismissal.

"It is a little narrow street, but I believe a lot of juniors live here—" passively lamented Markandam Iyar.

"Yes, sir, but it is in a central and hopeful position. You know it leads to the Tank Square which finally overflows into the Luz," boldly replied Kedari in the veiled language of allusions. His senior loved delicate flattery administered by courageous and cunning hands. The chauffeur thought that even this condescension was too much and at his expense—the trouble of piloting his stately car through narrow and plebeian quarters. He cut short the compliment by setting the car in motion.

Kokilam greeted Kedari with a smile.

"You too are smiling welcome to me this day, Kokilam—" said Kedari.

"Your senior seems to be getting nice with you. It is my good luck—''

"Yes, yes, every failure is mine. Every success is yours—that is feminine modesty. I know you have made us simply honorary workers for your sex—in return for smiles—"

' Why this rare kindness to drop you at your house—?"

"Why ask questions? You said just now, it was your good star—"

"Then keep the secret to yourself—"

"Don't get angry, dear Kokilam, though it renders you a shade brighter and prettier," said Kedari in a coaxing voice, "I pulled him out of a ditch into which he fell, I mean a conversational ditch. You know my senior has not wide culture

except case-law culture. I protect him from many juvenile attacks and he is becoming more and more attached to me, in spite of his chauffeur, clerks, friends, poor relations and other juniors. Conquest is simple for the brave, and impudent-minded. I have simply annexed myself to him or the other way. I surround him. I don't allow others to go near him. Might is right. And the might of impudence is indeed very great—and very right. The meek shall never inherit the earth. I have tried my best to be meek—it's impossible when you are out for plunder. My life is one true commentary. I have tried both—".

"You are always praising vice and wickedness, dear. It will lead us to trouble one day. You are just the reverse of your friend Ramu whom you have so often described—"

"That is why I am a rising junior and he a d—d camp clerk slaving to all. By the bye, I forgot to tell you. I met Ramu on the marina to-day just now. He looked the same old fellow, meanly dressed—poor camp clerk on twenty-five rupees. What could he do? He sold away even his lands—"

"To help friends like you—fool that he was—why did you not take him home with you. Common gratitude—" protested Kokilam.

"Common gratitude—but I was gliding at the rate of forty miles an hour, and do you mean to say

my boss will take in every passer-by friend trudging on the road? It took a lot of circumventing and preliminary talented speaking even for me to put myself in the car and bring it here—that you might see me at least once stepping down from a car—"

"It would have pleased me more if you came home trudging with Ramu—

"Then you did not even greet him."

"Poor thing!—you have never been inside a motor car. You have no time to greet a pedestrian when you are gliding over the oiled roads at forty miles an hour—".

"You might have at least got down at once."

"To greet a camp clerk and lose the chance of you and the Nadu Street seeing the huge car draw up at my house? No, no, I am not so foolish or sentimental yet."

"If I were you, I would have jumped from the car, and prostrated before Ramu. Think, dear, but for him we should be starving now—you would have been—"

"I should have been even more adventurous and successful and be spared the mind-annoying scruples. You don't know, Kokilam, how painful it is for a man to feel obliged to another. To be ungrateful is so natural, that your whole being asks for it, strives to forget kindness received. One man's destiny is never marred or made by

another. It is all seemingly so in this world of *maya*. If you yield to it, you are undone. Some one else would have been a Ramu to me. The water poured on the hill-top will find its way down—through every obstacle, rock, tree and jungle growth. It cannot afford to stop at and thank every little hole or cleft that opened out a way down."

"Dear, it is the vilest philosophy I have yet heard from you. The fact remains—you are ungrateful by training at least. I am afraid—"

"Gratitude is the weakest tie and nourishes neither. Napoleon has said it over and over again and once for all."

Kedari drew himself up into an appropriate posture. "Dear Kokilam. You are just a female edition of Ramu, a little more militant and more noisy—Meenakshi is my type and ideal —my unmarried life was troubled with the squeamish idealism of Ramu's friendship and my married life is now oppressed with your ignorant criticism. Life is one continuous *yaga* or sacrifice even as our own texts say. One lives upon the other. The snake lives upon the frog and the frog lives upon the fly. Each is yet innocent in its own way. That is the rule of life."

"You will rue all this one day, dear. I feel it, though I am a woman. There is a God ruling even over the vakil world. But for Ramu's help, you

would never have become a vakil. But for Ramu's letter, you would have never got your first brief—a big one. Without Periaswami Iyar's case your boss would never have cared for you which meant for him a good *senior* fee; without Ramu, the first step in the ladder, you must be grovelling on the flat—"

"And I would have never married you—"

"And would now be a begging lad in the streets. May God forgive you. Why don't you go now and search for him in the likeliest places? Did he see you at least—"

"We saw and recognised each other in a fleeting moment, but instinctively turned away. The fault is in neither. The world is such, dear and young Kokilam," he continued taking her hand and pressing it with the pressure of love, "I am not wicked in truth. I do worship Ramu now and then at heart. He is a camp clerk and I am a rising vakil. Friendship is such an even plank, dear, you can't balance it on these two uneven heads. It will tilt. You must see the facts as they are. It is God's will. Weak idealism is as sinful as gross realism. Dear Kokilam, tell me, the menu for the night. I smell onions. They are the nicest food for a day of great moments. Let us enjoy ourselves when the cup is full. Spill it not, dear, by trembling and fear or a too keen and kind analysis of men and things—"

By way of confirming his desire, Kedari imparted a warm kiss on her cheeks ere he reached by stages her lips, tinted like the rose. For even the bravest quail before moody girls, doubly so if they are wives.

CHAPTER XXIX

A NEW LIGHT

KEDARI was partially wrong in his description of Ramu to his wife as an ill-clad camp clerk. Ramu was certainly ill-clad according to up-to-date sartorial fashions but was no more a camp clerk, as our readers know, but a Deputy Tahsil at Dusi with already a good record of work behind him. When Kedari met him on the beautiful marina, Ramu was on his way to interview, by appointment, his high official head and patron. Mr. Cadell was now at Madras as the first member of the Board of Revenue by a luck, which though it began to ripen late, did ripen quick and full.

The Office of the Board of Revenue is located in the Chepauk Palace on the marina facing the sea, by the side of the stately and imposing University Buildings and in close proximity to the Government House. The Palace was once the pleasure garden of the Nabobs of the Carnatic. Instead of the melodious voice and timbrel sound which once filled its sensuous halls, it was now busy with the clatter of typing machines and the

faint sighs of overworked and perspiring clerks. But this is the story of the ground floor. As you ascend the broad flight of wooden steps, polished to the smoothness of a slate, the air is more reminiscent of the voluptuous pleasures of a vanished century. The marble walls still shine in polished beauty. In a spacious front room, choicely furnished and open to the direct breeze from the sea, Mr. Cadell was in a lounge smoking a havannah cigar. He leisurely puffed meditative rings of smoke and watched their thin ascent with the joy of a child throwing pebbles into the air. Mr. Cadell was obviously waiting for some friend, slightly fretting at the delayed prospect of pleasure. Steps ascending soon reached his ears and he knew Ramu's shy and timid footfall.

"Come in, Mr. Ramachander," heartily greeted Mr. Cadell without moving an inch from his lounge. The mild climate of Madras and the evening breeze that blew in lustily was really enjoyable. "Please do take this chair," pointing to one by his side, "or better this nice lounge, it will make you comfortable. Don't be shy. You are no more a camp clerk but a Deputy Tahsil entitled to be seated with me. I have been quite eager to see you. Your masterly essay on the science government, under the guise of a statement for minor repairs of the Dusi-Mamandur Lake, has created quite a sensation in the Board of Revenue both for its manner and matter and its philosophic temper."

"You have been always kind to me, Sir," said Ramu in embarrassed tones.

"Indeed, I had a talk with the Vice-Chancellor of the University just an hour ago—I can't really understand a university which refused you a degree twice. I showed your report to the Vice-Chancellor and to H. E. the Governor. They are delighted with it. Well, let us now discuss official affairs. You have done creditable work at Dusi. I'm glad I gave you that promotion. I agree with your creed that in an agricultural country like India rural reconstruction is the primary thing—"

"Which the British Government have neglected for over a century."

"Yes, I know, but let me mend it under your inspiration. Let us make a beginning." Mr. Cadell could not help giving the highest compliment he ever gave a fellow man—"Let me know something about the tank, as fully as you can—"

Dusi is an interesting village irrigated by an almost perennial channel from the Dusi-Mamandur Lake. The village itself is planned on the usual model—a small, handsome Vishnu Temple in the middle of the square, and the streets running all around with the labouring population hanging around the corners of the square in scattered clusters. A small tank to the right is a supplementary sheet of water, while the main source of supply is the channel from the Lake. The

Dusi-Mamandur Lake itself is almost a natural formation. Two chains of hillocks running from north to south almost meet within hundred yards of each other, suggesting a big lake. Some Pallava king of the early centuries seized this favourable site, and threw a strong earthen *bund* between these two hill ranges and created an artificial lake of thirty square miles good enough to irrigate, once full, over five thousand acres, which nourished in turn something like thirty villages. The wild and magnificent river of Palar flows within three miles of the lake and a channel branching higher up from the river feeds the lake in monsoon time. Once full, the lake has enough water for two years. Dusi is the first village to enjoy the benefit, and so even in lean years it has a bright harvest. It was till recently the most prosperous and rich village in the whole of the somewhat arid district of North Arcot. But this perpetual prosperity depended on one condition. The channel which connects the river and the lake is over ten miles in length and should be cleared of silt and sand, and kept cut and open every year to receive the wild freshes from the river in monsoon time which rarely last more than a week.

When Ramu became the Deputy Tahsil, the condition of Dusi was poor and pitiful. Nearly twenty years before, in an year of unprecedented rains in the craggy hills of Chittaldrug, the Palar flooded the whole plains and broke its banks. The

connecting channel was wiped out with sand and the work of reclaiming it was beyond the means of one village or many put together.

Ramu traced to Mr. Cadell the history of the village and lake in a fervid and rambling manner which carried conviction though it was not in a sustained narrative form. Ramu urged again after a pause, " The clearing of the sand all the ten miles of its course, is beyond the means of any one village or all of them put together. The poverty of two decades have ruined their co-operative spirit and their resources. Many lines of division and fight have left even their temple ruined. It is clearly the duty of the Government to do this major work and bring once again corn and contentment to these unhappy people."

"But Ramachander, how could the Government find a lakh for minor irrigation for a single group of villages? It is impossible!" exclaimed Cadell.

"It must be possible; otherwise Government abdicates its first and only function. There will be more discontent and disorder in these places. Any Hindu Rajah would have done it the same year. In the last twenty years, Dusi has lost its finest men, its Sanskrit scholars and thinkers. For lack of food they have fled to more prosperous places. The peasants have turned dacoits, one killing the other. Communal factions have set in—."

"What on earth has that to do with the lake? You always quarrel about these things as a matter of daily routine—" cried Mr. Cadell.

"Yes, it is a mock fight which they almost enjoy when the stomach is full, but a bitter and a true one when it is empty. It is the most natural thing for any hungry man to do, to find out something to quarrel about; communal trouble no less than national wars are hatched in hungry stomachs. When people have nothing to eat, they try to eat each other—the simplest and the most primitive thing to do—."

Ramu paused for breath and Cadell intervened, "Yes, Ramachander you are right. In your quiet way you are throwing a new light upon the whole question."

"Things don't stop there. Twenty years ago there was no need for a Police Station or the Court of a Sub-Magistrate. But now there is tight work for both and the roots of the evil are driven but deeper. The cost of Government increases and vested interests grow and live on the toils of others. More and more men are diverted from the primary labour of the plough to the barren work of ink spilling and red tape."

"Yes, Mr. Ramachander, there is a point in what you say. But it is just that which is civilisation. You can't change it," said Mr. Cadell.

"It may be so. But see what it means for nine out of ten. One lives upon nine, civilisation is now

merely an affair of shirts and coats. The soul and body starve. The breathing is strained. The pulse is feeble. The heart aches. But man must go abroad in false clothes. Plain living is lost and high thinking is rare. If I own a cow, I use its milk not to nourish the body of my children but sell it that I may buy a shirt and hang it heavy on my body in a tropical climate, or purchase kerosine oil, matches, coffee and sugar and such false things."

"But these simple faults, Ramachander, need not bring ruin to your villages. The fault is with you. You don't work hard. You don't manure or improve your fields but waste your precious time in gossip and lay the evil on an all-forbearing God or a foreign Government."

"We are powerless in our lands. Just see what happens in a village. By direct taxation Government takes one-third of the gross produce, and yet another third goes out in the wake of civilised needs, cloth and kerosine, coffee and sugar, and but one-third is left for the village. The rest we export. We need shelter both from the howling trade-winds of civilisation and the enormous cost of Government. So, we are ill-fed. And the lands don't yield well. A hungry man is no thinker. He does not and cannot plan his future."

"It is so, Mr. Ramachander, in an agricultural country, the Government should bestow more attention on irrigation. But tradition has moulded the

work of the civil service in another way—more bent upon keeping the system going efficiently than originating policies according to the needs. The pull must come from above or from you—the people. The atmosphere should be changed. What can one man do?—even a Senior member of the Board of Revenue? And I have done my day's work. Younger men should try their hands." Mr. Cadell laughed heavily.

"Even one man can do a lot, and elder men alone have the prestige to do it. Only one man can initiate and set the first wheel in motion. Others will follow whirling and rattling. For instance, I composed the communal strife in Dusi by initiating some temple repairs and calling in the whole village to work a day in return for a free feeding. It cost us one hundred rupees but the Public Works Department would estimate a budget for one thousand rupees and take three months over it. There was again strife between capital and labour, Mirasdars and tenants, for owing to the impoverished state of the lake, agriculture was paying to neither—and the Government *kist* in between. I found a good spring in the lake bed and dredging it at a low cost, we brought water to the withering crops. Once the way was shown, now they have cut a long channel in the bed and it will solve the problem for a few acres. If other villages also want the same water there will be trouble, scramble and fight between them. Poverty is the parent of

crime. The peasants of the last generation are turned dacoits now. If you grant me a lakh of rupees from the Government, I will push the work this summer and fill the lake with water next rainy season. A lakh invested now will bring thirty lakhs worth of corn to the country. I can restore peace and prosperity in one year to something like twenty-five villages to a quarter of a million souls."

"It is a beneficent story that you tell me, Mr. Ramachander. I rather think with you. Too many of us are now engaged in work which may be classed as mere pleasure-producing work. Someone must grow the food stuffs of the world —yes, you have thrown a new light on the whole question. I wish the Governor was here. He would not then press for an additional three lakhs for the police but allot this one lakh. I will do my best, Ramachander."

CHAPTER XXX

CONFLICTING VIEWS ABOUT A MOTOR CAR

KEDARI was forging ahead in his own line and even his seniors in the profession had to bow to the inevitable. Kedari and Mr. B. Markandam Iyar found that their alliance both offensive and defensive was mutually beneficial. This provoked the jealousy of a large number, but to a successful man that is as little an impediment as stray boulders in mid stream are to a river. If anything, they only serve to indicate the speed of the current.

Flooded rivers overflow their banks and have rarely a fixed course. Ambitious men are wilder than wild rivers.

If Markandam was ambitious, it was a skulking ambition that achieved its objects by sly methods. But Kedari thought that ambition was a caste mark which ought to be worn on the forehead that others might recognise it at a glance. His early training removed all necessity or scope for calculation. So he simply acted according to his desires and never

reckoned the cost. The world paid for it and he was occasionally thankful for the good sense of his fellowmen who kept alive a bright soul, eventually for their own benefit. Kedari, now over five years at the bar, was already feeling the narrow proportions of the Nadu Street. But Kokilam was a somewhat unequal partner for his ambitious schemes. She was not even passive as a Hindu wife should be, but even courageously fought him at every ascending step—a weak-hearted poor thing in his eyes, the daughter of a poor pandit, wived by destiny to a 'star'.

Kokilam protested again, "Dear, you are spending all that you are earning. Two daughters and a son for our age are surely God's warning to us to save—"

"I am alive to your facts and philosophy, dear Kokilam. But if God Himself were a vakil and a junior to boot, he would know our difficulties and act and advise the same way. It is so easy to preach good things. But my profession is such a complex and cunning one. Nothing here succeeds like success, at least pretended success. You must show a thousand to earn a five hundred. And to pretend a thousand, one will have to spend at least six hundred. You are good at arithmetic, dear, tell me, the loss—a net loss of one hundred, which you hope to make good one day when you earn three thousand like my boss."

"Only three thousand! People say he makes thirty thousand."

"It's all humbug. You will know the truth of a vakil's income only on his funeral day, dear. Like woman's love secrets, it is man's only secret, never known to the other, not even between husband and wife. The world is but a stage—how true are the great dramatist's words. We paint and powder our faces and our hearts and dance an hour or two like a butterfly on a sunny day. Our wings are weary ere the round is over and we die ere we learn the pleasure-game."

"Are you too taking to philosophy?"

"It is stealing over me, dear, but I must shake it off or it would lead me on to melancholy. Books lead to brooding. Brooding means reverie. Reverie means loss. The pot will not boil and, dear Kokilam, you will then be even more angry with me. Once I was not like this. My heart ached with compassion for the guileless and the poor when gentle Ramu was my friend, philosopher and guide. But five years of vakil's life make one shed all such emotions. Life is harsh and real. He who knows it not, goes under. All his fine wailings will be—"

"All the more is the necessity to save, dear. Look how poorly off are your children and myself and you spend so finely on yourself," said Kokilam.

"Can't be helped, dear. He who goes on the stage, can't afford the adventure to go naked. Even a fool if he wants to be a buffoon has his coats, bells and ornaments; and a vakil's wardrobe is in essence longer than yours or *Droupadi's*. Civilised life is a

game of skill in clothing. One step leads to another and a well-dressed man can't walk on the dusty roads without being stared at but needs a car. I am already thinking of that,—Kokilam, public opinion forces me to think of it. My friends egg me on to the folly. I must take the precipice or go down the chasm—life is moving and our profession is a race and a jockey must not be tender to the knee cap or his shoulder-bones. The motor car agents spare me not even one week. They flatter me. They prophesy like gypsies. How many times I could turn them back. Poor fellows! They too must live and have their share of the common loot. I feel humbled. I must go in for a car and pay for it—at least a Ford Car. It is cheap and useful—"

"A car, a motor car! dear, impossible!" cried Kokilam when she found a pause, "you stint the barest necessities for our children, and I wear only a fifteen rupee *sari* and have not yet a diamond ear-ring. You talk of a car while I meekly wait for better times, for our most common needs, impossible—."

"Dear, still to please you even if I begin with a diamond *thodu* for you, it will cost us half-a-car and—"

"But it needs no petrol to keep it going, to keep it shining—what will others think if you own a car when your wife looks like a servant-maid? Men have a knack of beginning at the wrong end—a car is a waste."

"No, dear, you don't know. A car will not be a waste. It will double my fees, which your *thodu* cannot. Clients, rustic fellows, will pay well at least for a joy ride. In approved terms, it is the symbol of my success. And we can go together to the Beach. The judges and the idle folk will recognise us and know our names."

"But suppose you don't get any money for some months," asked Kokilam.

"Poor thing! you don't know the world. The wise tiller tills the soil and keeps ready the seeds. The all-knowing Maker will send the monsoon rains in time and the tiller who has done his duty profits in the end. Motor cars are meant for motion and wheels are made for flying. Buy a car and think no more of the morrow than the fowls of the air. God will speed you."

"This religiousness, I can't follow, dear. You are new and seem a different man every moment. I can't argue. But I quite distrust your life. It is false and uncertain. I would rather be a camp clerk's wife with a steady pay."

"I wish Ramu had taken you instead of commending you to me. The thing is not in your blood—the daughter of a poor pandit. You can't understand these high things. The results will justify me."

Kedari spoke with rising anger.

Kokilam felt slightly wounded by the reproachful tone of her husband and retired to her own work.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE

High Court Buildings,
Madras.

Murugan and Thoppai enlarged on bail.
Kedari.

Such a telegram was received by the local vakil at Trichinopoly from Kedari. Murugan trembled with joy when he heard the news in jail. But Thoppai was sullen and spoke in a dull voice with feeling and sorrow, "Let us go to our vakil and tell him the whole story. If truth and innocence can't win in this world, fie upon vakils and the British Raj! I would not have led this virtuous life."

Finding Murugan silent and nerveless he spoke again. "Muruga, cheer up. It is all some passing ill-luck, we shall soon be free as we are already. Now the tide has turned in our favour. The dark fortnight is over. It is the work of our enemies in the village and the concoction of the police to please Periaswamy."

Murugan did not speak a word but agreed to go to the vakil's house. It was a small one but it

overlooked the beautiful and broad river Cauvery which was now reddish, rolling and full with the freshes from the hills. It was Mr. Patanjali Sastri's ancestral home. It was reminiscent of the many deeds of piety his forefathers had done for self-evolution and for communal welfare. So the house was happily built on the banks of the river. Mr. Patanjali was the first in a long line of pandits distinguished for their scholarship in *Mimamsa* and *Vedanta* to break an academic inheritance to the chariot of a money-making profession. Naturally he was good at Hindu Law and combined a noble bearing and a rich character with a wide culture. But he lacked the driving power which propelled a man in the eddying waters of modern life. He had a liking for civil work but somehow he did not get it to his own pacific regrets and the somewhat violent discontent of his partner. Except for the house, he had no material inheritance and had to keep the pot boiling. So he drifted into criminal practice like a twig to the willows only to be enmeshed therein.

Patanjali had not yet lost the bloom of youth. The innate radiance of the Brahmin still shone in his face, somewhat assisted by the three broad white lines of sacred ash on his forehead. The room was small, heavily littered with papers, books, furniture and rags and seemed uninviting for an office room, if it did not function for other purposes as well. Murugan eyed the vakil

satisfactorily but Thoppai viewed the man and the furniture with a look of dismay. He had seen some vakils' rooms in his younger days and in fact served under a leading vakil at Kumbakonam for three months as an attender and knew the pomp and splendour of the successful.

"We are grateful to you, sir, for the bail you have got us," Murugan began.

"Be grateful to the Madras vakil. He is a clever, rising young man," quietly spoke Patanjali.

"We are innocent and poor people, sir, wrongly arrested by the police. We had nothing to do with the rioting. The *mirasdars* are our enemies. They have set this up and connected us with a local agrarian dispute. Our only offence is that we are or were somewhat rich. Help to save us, sir, we shall be eternally grateful to you. Swami is our God now, sole God," Thoppai cried.

Finding the vakil silent, he repeated, "We are quite guiltless. The real rioters are our customers for the toddy shop and we are purposely mixed up by the prosecution. The village hated us for the toddy shop and the way in which we were becoming rich. The evil is now placed on us to wipe us out."

"But the prosecution case is that you are the chief offenders. Yours were the brains that planned and worked it—the rioting," Patanjali calmly spoke.

"What is our motive, sir, our gain?" beseeched Thoppai.

"To humble Periaswamy Iyar," the vakil replied, "The rioters set fire to his hay-rick and granary. His loss is immense and the thing is described as a little war which lasted well-nigh three hours. The walls of the cattle-pound were demolished. The Brahmin streets were invaded—"

"Others did it," said Thoppai, "we had neither part nor lot in it. On the other hand our toddy shop too was broken into and we lost everything. The shed was set on fire."

"Their story is you did it yourself," the vakil rejoined, "to create evidence in your own favour and escape punishment. Well, there is a lot of evidence on the other side. The whole village is against you. I don't see much hope—except that you have a good judge, a mild and humane man who has to retire in a month or two. That is your best chance. I will do my duty."

Meanwhile Thoppai poured into Murugan ears, aside, "This man seems to be a pious and orthodox soul, not fit to fight our case. Shall we send for our Madras vakil? We should not mind the money."

And as Murugan hesitated, Thoppai took the initiative and asked, "Shall we have our Madras Vakil to assist you, sir?"

"You may please yourself—if you have the money. I have no objection. The trial comes off next month. Get ready."

Muruga and Thoppai took leave of their vakil.

"Thoppai, I find of late your advice all going wrong, quite wrong," began Murugan in a vexed voice, "we bribed the police with a huge sum to let us off and not to ruin us. The result is no better though we were saved some fine torture. Three years' savings, like water they came, like wind they went. Now our vakil wants five hundred for himself and if a Madras vakil is engaged he should be paid one thousand more. The whole world seems to be bent on getting rich in a day by squeezing us. Poor Thoppai, to what straits your reckless plans have brought us both! I trembled at every step but had not the courage to say 'no'. It is God's will and I bow to it. The only way out is to sell the cocoanut tope and be prepared with cash and make a last bid for liberty. Poor Ponni and my little boys and girls—I don't know what they will do—for food—they will have to go back to menial work or beg." Murugan broke down and sobbed like a child at the thought.

"It breaks my heart, Muruga, to see you weep. If I join you in weeping, we shall be undone. I must act. It is but a trial of God to test us. It is our evil time and Saturn is now wheeling round our birth star and doing havoc in and out. We must face it with courage or we shall go under. We should not trust our life to the pious Sastri. He has no fight in him. But bring over the Madras vakil who got us bail. Thanks to Periaswamy Iyar

who spread his name in our village. We shall hoist Iyar with his own petard."

"Thoppai, I am dizzy with hope and fear. This big town frightens me. I am a country mouse. Even as you put me into these troubles, you must pull me out. I will remain in the next village and I give you power to effect the sale for me. My steps are trembling and they will never take me to my village in this condition. Put Ponni and my children in safe hands. Try Sita—she is a sweet and kindly soul."

CHAPTER XXXII

A HOLIDAY MOOD

MR. CADELL impressed upon H. E. the Governor the soundness, even from the revenue view-point, of Mr. Ramachander's policy and the effect it would have on the masses, if carried out on an extended scale in an agricultural country, of allaying the prevalent discontent. He used effectively Ramu's argument that the roots of popular discontent are always and solely economic.

The renovation of the Dusi-Mamandur lake at an expense of over a lakh of rupees was the talk of the whole neighbourhood and Ramu's name became a household word in the district. Ramu worked still harder and consolidated his position both with the Government and with the people by his beneficent irrigation policy and whole-hearted devotion to rural reconstruction. He pressed into the labour of tank-renovation all classes of people including notorious hill gangs far and around who lived by plundering the poor people on the plains. He successfully did away with any drink-shop in or around the scene of work. He encouraged by word and deed, by example and theory, the plainest habits

and the simplest living. He himself led the way. He induced the habit of saving among the poor people. And he seemed almost a little saviour to this small colony of agriculturists who all worked with energy and devotion. Ramu himself was much pleased with this kind of labour. He found it elevating. The work was almost complete and already congratulations were pouring in. He also was in a farewell mood.

"Dear," asked Janaki one day, "what are y dreaming of? Not of the ancestral home at Alavanti which you have lost, in order to save the ancestral homes of so many here—"

"It is a bright thought for many a day—Janaki—you guessed right—I was thinking of Alavanti—I have worked all these years in the hot sun and under severe conditions. I should like to have some little rest, some little change. Had I but an acre of land and my ancestral home at Alavanti wh a happy and moral change it would be both for body and soul! I would go on leave for a month.

"With all the importance of a Deputy Tahsil on leave!"

"And bathe in the sacred Cauvery this parched skin and soul thirsting for its native waters. Alas! that is not to be. Sweet Alavanti! what tender memories you bring home to me—dear, where is Sita, our darling?" cried Ramu in an anxious paternal voice, for Ramu was now the father of a little girl.

"Which Sita do you mean?" asked Janaki with a sly smile, enhancing the pleasure of her lord, "why did you name our child, Sita? Will you confess to me, dear? Was it in kindly memory of your friend, Sita of Alavanti?"

Meanwhile Sita came tottering on her infant legs and Ramu clutched her to his bosom with a joy which only a father knows.

"It is a little wish of my heart—poor Sita of ıvanti, she is to me almost your sister. We have ıot heard of her at all these long, long years."

"Why should you not write to her?"

"Custom forbids my doing it."

"You said she had a fine and pretty lad who greeted you with open hands—his future father-in-law? My darling Sita is meant for that lad. I have made up my mind. Sita is such a loving soul but she is rich and we are poor folk."

"That is a capital idea, at least for that, I should at and earn and become rich."

"Pappa, what does Mamma say?" inquired the child.

"That there is a little lad in our village for you to play with," said Ramu.

And Janaki lapsed into silence.

"Poor Sita, my soul is set a-thinking. I did my small best once for her. That seemed to turn the tide in Sita's favour, but Murugan told me that it did not last long." Ramu spoke in a low thoughtful voice.

"Murugan, dear, do you know anything about him? He must be a big *mirasdar* by this time and Ponni a leading woman of fashion and riches among the *pallees* and *padayachees*."

"Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, you know, is a difficult one to propitiate—all women are—goddesses much more, is it not so, dear? Poor Murugan may be alright. But rich Murugan may be anything. Wealth, like ambition its parent, is a double-edged thing. It is both good and evil like fire—as you use it. But why should I philosophise for others. I long ago ceased to do it after trying Kedari."

Each gazed at the other for a moment for Kedari's name was a spell.

"Why should we not go to Madras and spend a week? You want some change and rest, dear," said Janaki who thought of Madras when Kedari was mentioned.

"And spend in a week the savings of a year and be poor and anxious once again about our darling Sita's future? Where shall we stay at Madras? No relations, none—for a poor man, and a Deputy Tahsil, though a little god at Dusi, is in Madras a grain of sand on the foreshore."

"Why, there is our Kedari," interrupted Janaki.

"Oh! I see, I forget that he is a relation of yours. But would he recognise you now? He is a budding or rather a budded lawyer, makes a thousand a month and drives in a car. He did not

recognise me once. But your pretty charms may have a different effect. But I shall not give you a chance to try them. Dear, dirty Madras! it is a huge, vampire growth, scattered, poor, and ugly."

Ramu changed the tone and topic and said, "Janaki, how little religious is your child-mind? Let us go to Palni Hills and worship there the all-powerful God Subramania. There is a vow taken by my mother while I was a boy of ten, still unfulfilled. Finishing it, we shall go to Rameshwar and be back again in a month. That is money well-spent."

"If a little brother will be born to our Sita, well-spent, indeed!" interposed Janaki and clasped Sita in a fond embrace.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE RIVER SCENE AT ALAVANTI

AFTER the rioting and the imposing array of the police and the magistracy of the land, the village of Alavanti was terror-struck and dumb for many a day. Even the gossip in the river seemed to run dry; for every one had a hushed look of silence and the group was thin and scattered.

Ponni's lot was the hardest even as her heart was the weakest. She was never prepared for this terrible blow in the evening of her life. Her eldest boy and her little girl clamoured and wept for their father and but dimly knew that some vague catastrophe had fallen upon them which moved their mother to tears. Seeing her children cry, she consoled herself to appease and reassure them. She remained a day and a night in the cocoanut tope after the fall of Murugan but found it too lonely and terrible. She thought of many friends and relations but none would suit her or have her in her misfortunes. At last she thought of Sita and her heart gladdened. At break of day she resolved to seek shelter under her roof. Sita too thought of Ponni, the wife of Murugan, the favourite tenant of

the god-like Ramu. In Ponni's greatest hour of affliction Sita thought she should send her a word of assurance and protection. She did so ere break of dawn. Ponni gladly accepted the invitation.

Some days passed on like this but the gloom had not yet lifted from the village of Alavanti. The events were too strong for rural life. The weather too was hot and sultry. Even the perennial Cauvery was but sluggish and seemed afraid to move down its course.

But one evening, Nature rekindled Alavanti, renewing fallen life everywhere in her own way. The sky darkened. The air freshened with lightning and thunder. The clouds burst in a splendid shower of rain. Next morning the river was full. The birds found their voices once again on the branches of peepul trees. The common crow did its scavenging with its eager flights once again from house-top to house-top. The cattle lowed with pleasure at the dawn of life that would soon be on the meadows. Tendrils sprouted everywhere foreshadowing a mantle of green over all. The night, before dawn, wrought a rich land-change, and the next morning was gay and peaceful. The fortnight of terror was forgotten and Alavanti was fresh and merry once again.

As usual, the pretty women of the village 'rang in the new' with a doubled mirth and vigour. Next morning on the river side every one slipped into

the old mood. And a month's news, held up by a strike of the tongues, was now richly interpreted in an outburst of gossip that moved freely and playfully like new freshes down the old hill-slopes. Even the Cauvery seemed to linger round the fair gossippers a while longer, kissing their pretty feet with the inlaid warmth and love of a month's absence and gurgled satisfaction at the wondrous tales that were told of Alavanti's rich and poor.

"Poor Periaswamy," said one who had but wetted her feet in the river and not yet taken a dip in the cool water, "though he was a miser, he was the richest here in our village. He is the hereditary nobleman."

"Miser for you and me and such poor folk but a handsome prince to vakils, doctors, magicians and astrologers," cried another.

"But I remember my mother telling me, that when Periaswamy was born, that my father prophesied," said she who was the only daughter of the village astrologer, widowed while she was but a girl of ten, "that he would be the ruin of the family and that the opposite house would take all his riches. How true is the prophecy now! Who would have thought, five years ago, that the neglected Sita would become the queen of Alavanti? Did you hear the latest news?"

She paused a moment turning round and said, "Sita has come by a huge treasure of a lakh of rupees!"

"How, how," cried all, "she was pulling down one portion of her house and then another, evidently in search of treasure—digging here and there."

"No, no, not that way," replied she. "Luck is strange. You know Sita's husband lived with a fair and rich dancing girl at Kumbakonam? She died only a fortnight ago, leaving all her property to Sita's son. Strange but true! What a lucky and bright lad he is and Sita, once the contempt of us all, is now the queen of Alavanti. My father's prophecy has come true."

"The talk is that she will also buy Murugan's lands. Thoppai is here, the scoundrel who should have been kept in jail. He is the author of our ruin. Periaswamy wanted to lynch him. But now, poor man, he is almost as homeless as Thoppai and may soon adorn the civil jail as a comrade in arms with his whilom tenant, Thoppai."

"Poor man, indeed! A Court of Law is the veriest ruin for all, him that takes and him that gives," philosophised the wife of one who was a clerk to a vakil some years before but now unemployed for certain daring misappropriations of moneys left with him.

"Our village will lose all dignity hereafter and ruled by a woman and a widow, it will but wear the most widowed looks. The time has come for you and me to ask our husband to sell our little to Sita and go to towns," revolted one who was always jealous of Sita.

"No, no, Sita is a religious and good-hearted woman. Periaswamy was a miser who but filled his belly and patted his children and never did any common good. She will do much for the village. Oh! there she is coming with her bright lad. Let us ask her. Look at her, friends. She seems handsomer than ever. The weeds of the widow sit well on her. She has always pity for the poor. Let us not alienate her by crude and unkind words," replied another who was always on her side.

Sita came, with her son sporting by her side, picking twigs, shells and pebbles on the bed, forcing footprints on the sand and running hither and thither, circling and reversing, motiveless and playful with all the innate charm of childhood. Sita was dressed in the shining vegetable silk with which high class ladies dress themselves in their widowhood. It well befitted her ascetic spirit.

"Come in, Sita, is it a fact that you have found a treasure-trove? Will you give us a share?" asked many from different sides.

"I will, with pleasure. I will use it, as far as I may, for the common good. I have already set apart money for rebuilding the village temple which is now in ruins, and for cleansing the tanks. I will not be a miser. But I will see that the small landholders get their water first for their fields. I will do everything for the poor, if you all will allow me to do it. I shall build a school for our boys

and girls. Till my son comes of age, I can spend as I choose. You should all help me. This village needs great reforming. But the best men, men with brains, have left the village and the idlers and the unfit alone remain here." She paused a moment.

"Poor Ramu who was an asset was driven away by the usurious Periaswamy who took his lands for a song," said one who knew Sita's mind, just to please her.

"And he has been well punished for it. Both man and God are against him now. Poor man!" said another.

"Sita, do you know anything about Ramu now? Where is he, what is he? Janaki too was a nice girl," asked one.

"Yes, my brother who is now at Madras tells me he is now famous and powerful. He is a Deputy Tahsil at Dusi. Janaki has now got a little girl, three years old." Sita looked tenderly at her son.

"What did you say mother?" asked the boy.

"That there is a little girl of her friend's—will you marry her?" answered a voice.

"I will, if she is as fair and rich as myself," jauntily cried the boy and ran driving away a calf that meanwhile had come to the river to drink water.

"Sita has already learned to talk with the accent of a queen. And Ramu is still in her mind. Janaki too occupies a part of it. And the lad seems to be more after the father than the mother—that

means he will go to the wall at the proper age of eighteen! I tell you none can be rich or poor for long. Thank God! Fortune is a revolving wheel." Led by the middle-aged lady, a little group discussed like this aside and commented in an undertone that was sufficiently audible to Sita to enable her to make out the drift of the spicy talk. But Sita took it all as part of life and never hated her enemies. Now her mind was full of beneficent schemes. She could not help thinking how well she could plan her little world of Alavanti for the joy of all if she had friends like Ramu and Janaki to help her.

——

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE TRIAL SCENE AT TRICHY

HARDLY had the river scene closed at Alavanti when the Court scene began at Trichy on the same day. Murugan was pushed into the dock with Thoppai and thirty other accused, a miscellaneous crowd of *pallees, padayachees,* pariahs and some brahmins as well. It was a universal impeachment, a washing out of the hostile and rowdy elements in the village, the last act of power of Periaswamy in conjunction with the police and the magistracy. Periaswamy's aristocratic anger shed its last flicker of light in the bright white halls of the Sessions Court at Trichy in which he was not an infrequent actor.

The Court hall was crowded with a variety of types, coeval with the diseases of a civilised, and the disorders of an ordered society, praying for remedies from one who sat for all appearance god-like and still, in an enthroned chair. Mr. Turner, M.A., I.C.S., District and Sessions Judge, had a calm and radiant presence somewhat improved in its religious aspect by his advanced years.

The *punkah* moved lazily to and fro suggesting a fatigued puller hidden and half-asleep beyond

the wall. The wind was just enough to scatter the flies and half-bristle the well-trimmed but grey moustache of the Judge. When the punkah puller started from his half-sleep, and tugged at the rope with alarmed energy, a tuft of silvery hair stood up, with an air of court inspection, showing which way the wind blew. But Mr. Turner was not aware of the woolly antics on his head, but simply gazed with wonder at the unusual crowd in the hall. He viewed sympathetically the infinite varieties of human pigment in dark and brown. He concluded that the rioting case should be a sensational one and felt uneasy in his broad, cushioned chair. His smooth forehead wrinkled somewhat and the glasses sat more firmly upon his nose for the benefit of the aging eyes. The judicial pose was perfect and it inspired the confidence of the pious litigants.

Mr. Turner, M.A., I.C.S., was a distinguished *alumnus* of Cambridge. He took to the Indian Civil Service of set purpose. He had an inherited taste for literature; his father was the author of two well-known books—*How to Make Money* and *How to Enjoy Reading*—both of them excellently written but handed down as an undiminished and only inheritance except for copies sent out for review but never reviewed. Mr. Turner had an early attraction for the glowing periods of De Quincy but they left him after reading, in a squall of emotion and fine feelings for the verbal, without

any motive or drive for work. That was hardly his temperament. Therefore he turned to his second favourite with increasing admiration. He read Macaulay with rapture and felt a strange but severe compassion for the unblessed souls of the East. He would have turned missionary, dedicating his life in the wilds of Hindustan or the lonely interior of China. But his father, as one who had written a classic on money-making, rejoicing in the vicarious prospect of success, insisted upon the Home Civil Service for his son. As a compromise, Mr. Turner selected the Indian Civil Service. The splendid pay attached to the Indian Service no doubt weighed temptingly with the father's mind while the son wrung from him the final approval—it was a generation when sons listened to their fathers' words in spite of their strong juvenile convictions.

Mr. Turner selected the Coromandel Coast of Madras not merely for the early historic traditions well-nourished in the memory by the beautiful pages of Macaulay but also for its evenness of climate and its reputation for mathematics and clear-thinking which a pure rice-diet engenders. He was himself a wrangler of some distinction though the Examination results were hardly an index to his taste or attainments in the subject.

Mr. Turner had hardly put in three years of strenuous work in the regular line when a severe famine broke out in the Districts of Chingleput and

North Arcot. Mr. Turner, whose sympathy for the Indian and compassion for the poor were already well-known to the Government, was put in sole charge of the relief operations. He took personal interest in the work and his compassion and clear-thinking made him an intimate sufferer with the famished. It led him to a philosophic recognition of all humanity as one, black, brown and white, and abolished all colour and race prejudice from his mind.

As a famine measure a new road was constructed, a village road upon the bund of a lake. The earth work served to deepen the lake, strengthen the bund and widen the country track into a road, three birds at a stroke. It was a useful work which employed hundreds of famished men and women. Mr. Turner gave it not only his brightest thoughts and orders but personal attention.

Among the crowd of workers, there was a *Yadhava* girl of seventeen. Shepherd lassies are the most attractive the world over. She was lambent like lightning in a cloud-spread sky, pure and spotless like a *thumba* flower in a meadow of common grass. She carried on her head a basket of earth. Gracefully and with a smile for all, she ascended the gradient to the top of the lake bund sure of foot and steady of form as if born to the work.

Mr. Turner seated in the deep shade of a banyan tree, could not take his eyes off this snake-like

beauty amidst the common green. He turned aside and thought of other things, of his Cantab culture and of his race. But his unmarried love yearned like a dew-drop to join its God-appointed mate a little lower down the same blade of grass, waiting for a breath of wind ere the heat of the day would quench either.

Starving beauty evokes the strongest love in a cultured youth. Love bridges in a self-exhausting, self-fulfilling moment the chasm of race, nationality and colour, prestige and position or leaps like water down the ravine. The *Yadhava* girl was descended from a race of chieftains who were powerful in the seventeenth century. She was now poor but hers was a Spanish complexion and a queenly face. The olive tint seemed to Mr. Turner the golden mean for the flesh. He married her and won his love, but he lost caste in his own service.

But Mr. Turner was absorbed in his own work and in his wife. He educated her and she was the most promising material. She was loyal and devoted. Each truly loved the other. But the gods are jealous of perfection on earth. Ere the tree yielded its first fruit, lightning struck at it. She died in child-birth and the child too died a fortnight later.

Mr. Turner was desolate and lonely. He sighed within like a farmer who sees his fields flooded with a hailstorm on the harvest day. A strange tempest from some unknown corner of the sea had broken the mast and the sails fluttered

down into the salt water. But Mr. Turner was still serene though sad. His sense of duty kept him to his work, though no fellow-member of his service befriended him. The main line of revenue work which he liked was no more for him. He was a fallen man, struck both by gods and men. He had to work in the chord line of judicial service. Even there his claims to a High Court Judgeship were several times overlooked. But he had lost his ambition for mere glory and power, many many years ago when his wife died in child-birth. His was now a ripe philosophic mind fed not on the dust of books but on the rich cream of life's many experiences.

Mr. Turner was due to retire in a month or two. Murugan's case was probably the last big one he would try. So he put into it a little more of interest and intended to do strict justice for the almost last deed on the bench. Mr. Turner therefore sat even more god-like than usual.

Kedari's appearance lent an added attraction to the trial scene. His reputation for oratory, forensic and public, came very far ahead of him ringing his name in advance like the bells tied to an elephant. Tamil boys who drink the waters of the Cauvery have a divine madness for spoken English and they thronged the Court room to taste the latest verbal concoction from Madras.

Nor was Kedari a disappointment. The higher the jump, the longer-shanked he always proved to

be, thanks to an inflatus within him. But for the turban he was stylishly dressed like an European with collar and tie which evidently inspired the vocal box with a fine and rare stream of words. The crowd in the Court hall, in uneven stages of literacy but with an even eye for fine looks, admired the youth and bearing of Kedari.

But Mr. Turner had his own aged sartorial views. He sniffed slightly when his looks met the somewhat imploring ones of Kedari. Mr. Turner liked the Indians to dress themselves in their own beautiful, simple way. Again, he preferred local talents for his aid, and had a wholesome dislike of Madras vakils. In fact he silently hated the High Court itself. So Mr. Turner did not like Kedari at first sight but surely he was not going to import it into the trial.

Murugan and Thoppai stood together in the dock. Murugan was almost fainting. His head swam and his legs trembled. But Thoppai felt a rare strength and courage within the spacious walls of justice, and in whispers, poured comfort and strength into the chicken-heart of Murugan.

"Look, Muruga, look at our Madras vakil, dressed like a *dorai*, and take heart. See how he stands, like an arrow fixed to the bow, ready to fly at our enemies. We will be free soon. I already feel the fetters melting down my feet. Muruga, pick up courage at least to see the day of freedom and then die—."

Murugan did not reply to Thoppai's imploring words but simply raised his looks to Kedari, then to the Judge, then to the lofty ceiling as if in progressive realisation of the divinity that did shape his end.

The trial did not take as much time as was anticipated by the public or by Kedari who came out on the day-fee scale. Kedari really did his best, though he was somewhat new to criminal work. His dash and drive, his fine phrasing and pleasant voice did a good deal to compensate for lack of technical skill and knowledge.

Though Thoppai could not understand much of the English language, he was all admiration for Kedari. Thoppai was an intellectual being and a *padayachee* to the core. The aroma of fight set free the grey-hound instincts in him. Like a disabled soldier he was wrenching his wrist in sullen agony. Of all the combative professions in the world, is not the profession of law superior even to war in many respects, even in the primary respect of ruin to both the parties ?

Thoppai was both intellectual and combative and his admiration for Kedari made him self-forgetful. He elbowed Murugan now and then in undisguised tones of contempt, " What Muruga, sleeping at this critical hour ! Look at our Madras vakil—he is raging like a lion and it is a fight which must bring us freedom. Poor Patanjali, our local vakil, sits like a lamb by his side muttering something,

probably the unfinished morning Sandhya prayers. And he from Madras does not even care to turn his side. Good luck, we did not rely upon him. The whole crowd is hanging upon the lips of Kedari. Such a sight, Muruga, is worth a cocoanut tope and more. We will surely be free. Who can stem this raging flood of words ? Every one is hanging on his lips, do you see Muruga ? "

Murugan reluctantly whispered, " But Thoppai, the Judge is not, see how he purses his lips and twitches his moustache now and then. He seems to fret. Our Madras vakil, overdoes things, I fear, as you have always done. It may all be mere bluster. We do not know the language. The men you admire, I begin now to suspect. But God is great and my own crime I fully know. It may not be in the charge-sheet now but it is engraved in my heart. Repentance alone—."

He was afraid to whisper more for Thoppai already received a pull which brought him down to his real state, from a neighbouring constable who did not like his militant posture and constant mumbling.

For three days the trial went on. Kedari really did his best. His eloquence carried weight with the assessors who knew very little English and understood him less even when they kept awake. At five in the evening on the third day the trial was over. Mr. Turner, contrary to his usual practice, reserved judgment.

CHAPTER XXXV

DESPERATE REMEDIES

MURUGAN was calm and patient in the central jail of Trichinopoly blaming himself for the fate which had befallen him. But Thoppai swore vengeance against the whole world. His was the indomitable spirit of the rebel which a prison-house only stimulates and intensifies. The one redeeming feature was that it was possible for Murugan and Thoppai to meet often and Murugan exercised a restraining influence on his friend.

"The work is very hard, even cruel," Murugan spoke to Thoppai one day, "grinding corn at the mill. I have forgotten in my later-day luxury, even the mild work of plaiting cocoanut leaves or roping cocoanut fibres. My palms are bruised with work and have not yet hardened—it is but a month; my muscles have grown tender with a decade of luxury. But I do the work with fortitude. But the jail warders are cruel. They punish us for nothing and for the mere joy of it as a preventive and playful measure. My first month has made me even more philosophical. The jail system is cruel and gross—men are made into

beasts. Impounding men in prison like cattle in pound, for frail acts of wrong but inevitable grazing—! So many things are ill-jointed in this world, Thoppai, I sometimes think there is much reason in what you say."

"But Muruga, you take things lying down," Thoppai spoke with unusual calm allowing Murugan to finish his speech, "Every turn of the oil mill to which I am yoked for work has but knotted me the more into a rebel. I have vowed vengeance against Society for punishing me like this, simply for scheming to become rich. I will never forgive myself or others till I dash myself to pieces. I have found a kindred soul already in a friend here—the warders are afraid of me."

"Thoppai, you will but wear yourself out, like the sea upon the rocks, and make yourself more wretched. Violence is not the way to win in life anywhere, much less here. You are both ambitious and violent. Ambition is a curse. I have learnt it somewhat late, though my master ever preached it to me. I lost the flavour of life when I became an indolent lessee living on others' toil, from a hardworking tiller of the soil, contented and happy, with the mind rich for the day with the day's work."

Thoppai nodded dissent. But Murugan continued.

"As Ponni always said, in an evil day I met you. The toddy shop has been our ruin."

"But is it not, Muruga, innocence punished in our case. What lot or part had we in the rioting? We did but sell liquor to those who wanted to augment their courage for the impending fight."

"Technically, Thoppai, we are innocent of rioting. But did we not in three years, starve the poor, rob the children of their food by vending drink to their fathers, stirred up indirectly riots in the village between the tiller and the land-holder. You did it by your philosophic preaching at the drink shop hour in, hour out in the lucid interval between one pot and another. I did it by my own example in another way—how from a tiller, I became rich and the envy of all the *pallees* and *padayachees* of the village. When a system crashes, the good and the bad go alike to the bottom."

"If we did, Muruga, we did but the most virtuous thing in the world, to lift the low and the poor from the slushy pond. Periaswamy Iyer has sinned for five generations—every starved death in the village is at his door—robbed the bread from out of the mouth of the poor that he might squander it on selfish joys and on priests, vakils and magicians. Has the God which has punished us punished him or his ancestors?"

"Thoppai, wait, he is but the creature of a system which might have done good once though not now. Lacking good now, it will soon have its day of revenge and death. Already you see it before

your eye. He who exploits others, will be in turn exploited by another,—none can escape. Even Periaswamy is now a ruined man. He has lost his appeal, I hear. That means, everything is over with him. Next door to us is the civil jail and he may be an inmate there even now. So if he has exploited the tiller of the soil, he in turn is exploited by the vakils, money lenders and kindred people. If the spider lives on the fly, the lizard lives on the spider—that is the true ladder of life, only we do not see all the rungs at a time."

"Muruga, that is splendid philosophy. I agree with you, that the system is the source of the evil and the individual is but a minor wheel which goes blindly whizzing round the major. But how can we correct it? Now or never, if you and I don't attack it who will?"

"Attack it—that is not at all the way—you too will be caught in the whirlwind and swept off the ground. Allow the evil to grind itself out. Don't add fuel to the fire. If you touch it, you too will go flying round—and to pieces—witness our own fate. Do you want a greater lesson? At any rate, opening a toddy shop, Thoppai, is not the best way of doing it."

"It may not be the best, Muruga, it is still the most powerful and the only one open to us, the poor in rural parts, to change our position for the better and lend a helping hand to the poor. Wealth like water flows in a rut. Dear Muruga, if you

and I don't put our little feet in between and change the course, who will?"

"The pity is, Thoppai that we have put both our hands and feet too far and deep into the mud," exclaimed Murugan with a sigh of agony.

Thoppai ground his teeth with helpless rage, as he answered.

"Not for ever, Muruga. Though for a year we are tied down by the joint force of many—earth, air and water; sun, moon and stars. Man to man, I challenge open combat with any one as in ancient times. But the days now are not for strength but for musty words. Muruga, the world shall pay dear one day for keeping Murugan and Thoppai within closed walls for a year. Periaswamy found it to his cost. Now Society will—"

"What could you do, Thoppai, a poor *padayachee* against the might of the Sircar!" a mirthless and unshapen laugh escaped Murugan.

"I will tell you by and by," Thoppai growled and kept quiet.

"Some rash act that will lead us on to more peril?" Murugan guessed.

"You may look upon me, dear Muruga, with an incredulous eye. I will right the wrong I have done you, even if it should cost me my life which you have done not a little to nourish."

The bell rang and Thoppai left for his cell.

The evening darkened into night and Murugan went into a heavy sleep. Some one tapped him

gently on the shoulders and he was alarmed to see Thoppai with another. Thoppai calmed him in a low voice, "I have filed my way through. Muruga, thanks to my friend here. I can't go without you, don't nod dissent. I may be wicked but I am loyal and grateful as all powerful natures are. If you resist I must carry you on my shoulders, risk detection and make escape doubly difficult. But we cannot go without you. We cannot tarry here a second longer. We have already muffled and bound two watchmen—thanks to a brave young Muhammadan fellow-prisoner who is sacrificing himself for our sake. We must escape this very night or every thing is lost, not one year in prison then, but all through life, for this attempt to escape. We have done enough, don't ask questions. An hour ago, I thought we must wait here eleven months more. But God is kind to the wise and the brave and has given us long shanks, for what, if not to scale heights. This very night, the star-lit night, should see us free or dead. From Nagalapuram hills, we will carve a kingdom for ourselves,—the very thrones of the Sircar will soon tremble before the little steel rod of free souls that pierces through and through."

Within half-an-hour, the three were outside the outermost walls of the jail compound. Just a furlong off, there was a little temple of Ganesha in which an oil-lamp still fed and flickered a dying flame.

The three went silently and prostrated before the elephant god.

The stranger was moved to words, "Though I am a robber chieftain, I have found in you, Thoppai, a braver and more resourceful man than many even in my own clan. I owe my liberty to you. It is three years since I have seen my darling—a boy of seven who left my knee on the fateful day with a prating tongue, when I went on my last ill-fated adventure, 'Pappa, Pappa, when will you come back?' I thought but an hour ago I would never see him again; for, yet seventeen years remain for me, for being my father's son—I am punished for life for carrying on my hereditary profession, but, dear Thoppai, you have restored a father to a son and a son to a father. My body and all I have are yours."

He sobbed like a child and took Thoppai's hands into his own. Murugan moved like an automaton and did but imperfectly know himself as if in a dream which he did not believe.

But they fancied they heard floating voices and a distant tread of disturbed feet. Each looked at the other, startled and scared. They began to fly across the fields as only escaped prisoners know how.

"How many miles still from here to Nagari hills—your home?" enquired Thoppai.

"One hundred and fifty miles,—we must avoid the public roads. The track is a secret one and that is

our safety. It is rough, hard and jungly in a line with the base of the Eastern ghats. And it will take us three days. But we have friends on the way. May our tribal gods bless us!" The chieftain spoke and prayed.

"May our tribal gods bless us!" echoed Thoppai and Murugan in one voice.

CHAPTER XXXVI

ON THE CREST OF THE WAVE

THE next day Kedari was sauntering on the beach at Madras. He was brimming with joy. For he had broken the record already in many respects in the arduous struggles of the legal profession. The very day on which he returned from Trichy he bought a car, and glided over the tarred roads of Madras, pulsing with the happiness of a Napoleon over the Alps at the very gates of a bewildered Italy, or of Antony in the pleasure boats of Egypt waiting for Cleopatra. He rummaged the pages of the history of the English Bar and found no parallel to his own career of such distinction within so short a period. Of late, he had read a good deal of the memoirs and biography of the great men of the world and was encouraged by the humble beginnings of most of them. He had an instinctive conception of the essentials of mundane success. His analysis was only confirmed by his wide reading. Courage and industry, ambition and drive made the pages of history and the fortunes of individuals.

Only one can wear the crown. A peak is a lordly stone that sits on the bowed heads of hundreds. Many must go under if one should go up. It is the passionless rule of life.

In his eagle flights of fancy and survey, he wished many a time to shed but a single heavy feather. Though he seemed and in fact was an affectionate husband at home, he could not help feeling that marriage was a soft mill-stone round his eagle-neck. A crow might feel it an ornament and fly from house-top to house-top, cawing. But an eagle did feel its weight in its highest wheelings.

Kokilam was no doubt pure, good and loving but she was somewhat of an unequal partner, tame, timid, scrupulous, unimaginative and without ambition, the daughter of a half pandit and half priest, who like the common bird, cared only for the feed of the day. Kedari only hoped that his sons would take after the father and keep alive the kingdom he would soon carve by the very adventure of his spirits.

So he mused in his self-forgetful saunterings on the beach road and in fact even usefully collided with one or two fellow beings who recalled him to the realities, for otherwise he might be run over and the dream abruptly ended with bandage, plaster and high fever amidst a litter of hospital beds. So Kedari realising once again the immense risk of dreaming on the roads, immediately purchased a copy of *The Hindu* at a neighbouring bookstall

and hastened to continue his reverie safely on the stretch of sand near the breakers. The rise and fall of the wave cheered him on and he glanced at the news page of *The Hindu.* In glaring headlines he read:

A BOLD ESCAPE

FROM THE TRICHY CENTRAL JAIL

(From our Special Correspondent)

In the latter half of the night at about 2.30, a daring escape was made by three prisoners—the name of one being Murugan, the convict in the sensational agrarian rioting case which was recently tried. The names of the other two are not yet ascertained. The watchmen and warders on duty were neatly bound, tied down and gagged. Vigilant steps are taken by the police to re-capture them but they are not very hopeful of success as one of the escaped convicts is believed to be a notorious chief of a gang of robbers in the Chingleput District. (By wire.)

Kedari, with characteristic egoism, felt a peculiar elation on the reading of this news. He thought that his advocacy, if it fell flat on the senile ears of a civilian, had reached at least the ears of Providence. He shed a complacent smile around. He thought of writing, on the spur of the moment, a letter of congratulation—with a request for supplemental fees!—but quickly remembered that an escaped convict could not give his address even to his vakil.

Kedari's mind was already intoxicated, for he had scored a notable success in the afternoon in the High Court where he turned upside down a senior member of the bar to the delight of his friends and further consolidated his position. He did not even care to read the other columns of *The Hindu* where appeared a report of the appeal which he had beautifully dressed up for the reporter.

Kedari laid aside the paper and looked at the foaming sea. The wind blew in lustily with particles of spray. The sand was fresh, warm and yielding like the embraces of true love. The waves rose and fell, like a playful child upon the lap of its mother. Kedari reclined on the sands in a wistful mood watching the sportive hide-and-seek of the water. The salt sea air sensuously pinched his cheeks. A common mind would have turned to thoughts of gentility and love amidst such surroundings. But Kedari had a mind like the sea, restless and uneasy and ever brewing for a storm at the lightest touch of the wind. He planned an imaginative edifice of his future.

The throne of the Moguls he would seize. What was Baber but a wild Turcoman with a spear head and a horse? Times have but changed the implements. The seat was still there. He would capture the Imperial City of Delhi, the Viceregal *gadi* or whatever changing times call the throne of power by new names. He mused thus for an hour and worked out every detail and sprang from the

sands as a tiger would from the tall grass. Instead of going home to nourish this ideal with clasped hands and head in repose, he went straight into Mr. B. Markandam Iyar's house. He was ailing as usual from over-work and from a mind which ever frets for silver within its own narrow tether, like an urban calf stampeding at the rope's end for hay in lieu of mother's milk which has been drawn to the last drop to make coffee for man.

"You are ever sunshiny, Kedari," said he, "and to-day you are particularly bright—aye! fresh news of conquest?"

"Nothing, only I am tired of the wretched life of a vakil waiting and wheeling like a vulture for its prey, doing nothing but the work of a police-man in a different way. What final good do we do to society? We help the rich and share in the plunder or rob the poor to the last utensils—licking the little flesh on the bone till the tongue is bruised—the whole thing, Markandam, is so mean and vulgar. I must escape it one day. I have a capital idea now and a great vision. I will gradually give up this jade."

"What is it?—Kedari—Pray don't leave me."

"No, never, you always first and then I follow. The throne of the Moguls is waiting for you and me. Speed is success in this world,—a day in advance of others. We must act quick."

"I don't understand you, Kedari, you are unusually obscure and grand to-day."

"Am I? perhaps because the thought is high and big. We must stand for the coming elections. Announce our candidatures even to-morrow and begin work straight away. You should stand for the Legislative Assembly at Delhi and I for the Local Council here. Working together, it will be an easy win for both. None dare oppose us."

"For the Assembly at Delhi!—impossible. I would lose all my cases—my work will go—no."

"What? Markandam, are you not tired yet of making money? Even I am. I would gladly reverse the position and stand for Delhi. It would not look nice and people would call me usurping and impudent."

"For Delhi, impossible. I have not yet made enough—money flows through my hands like water. I have five daughters and three sons, you know, Kedari. But I think your idea is quite good. You stand for the Assembly; you are bidding for higher things. It will suit you. I am content with the Local Council. Are you the man to care for opinion? Storm the public, to use your own phrase. Let us work together."

"Alright, then, I am not afraid," said Kedari and took leave of Markandam.

But on his way home he mused within, "This too is quite good luck. But what a pity I have not saved these years! If only I had twenty thousand with me now, I would append my name to the list of Napoleons. Still one can't wait but must act."

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE TRUE PICTURE

WHEN Kedari returned home that night it was nearly eleven. Kokilam was anxious and greeted him with relief, " Dear, why these late hours which make me anxious? Ever since you went in for the car, you are late, and things are not going well."

" Ah! little silly bird. Where are our children? Have they gone to bed so early?"

" So early, it is eleven!"

" Is it eleven? I did not keep count of time to-day—"

" Or ever".

" A woman is always querulous; idle at home with little work for the full day, you can't but complain."

" Idle at home! kind dear, without a servant or cook to help me and with five children to tend—I love the dear young ones and don't grudge the work—but ours is the strangest and most uneven home in all Mylapore—not a servant at home, the lady of the house is worked like a dhobie's ass and dressed no better—and the lord goes in and out in a motor car—on the top and tide of fashion."

"How many times, dear Kokilam, am I to tell you over and over again—grief gnaws my heart at our poor condition within. The pomp without is put up for the world—the tyrant. The car is but an investment to make money. Foolish people construe it as a symbol of surplus wealth. But the clever man knows, it is only the pick-axe and the shovel of the shrewd worker who digs for gold underground and in darkness. Wait, Kokilam, wait but a year more. Your neck, nose and ears will soon be gaudily decked with the finest jewels till their weight crushes your fair flesh. And servants, you will have them in plenty and my boys and girls will be like princes."

"I care not for to-morrow's hopes, dear. The youngest boy but now cried for biscuits and went asleep crying. The eldest boy has not yet purchased his class books. The private tutor is dunning for his fees. My girls' eyes are watering for the new pattern *sari* which her school mates are wearing. Everyone is in arrears for the last two months. Your car is swallowing the life of us all. My cousin has written twice for the return of the loan of one thousand rupees he gave you in the first lean year. At this rate—."

"Nothing wrong will happen, dear. Last month I netted one thousand and five hundred rupees. I can wipe off these flea-bites in a day when I turn my attention to these small things. Wait six months more. When you are planning big, you should let

14

some water go to waste in the first few years. When you dam a river, water will take time to rise and touch the mouth of your fields. And once it does, in an hour, they will be flooded."

"All your similes and figures of speech are like 'sugar' written on paper—and tasted. I have sweetened myself many a time till now on such—" petulantly interrupted Kokilam.

"Kokilam, you don't know life. Wealth is like a spring in a river bed, the more you draw, the more it will flow—a faint heart only will fail—success is sure, wait a few months; even if I am not a king, you will be a queen—I am now on the crest of a tidal wave. I feel the surge within. But you are of a dull make. You never know your own pulse or that of others. But you are not to blame. You have been too long put into the kitchen—smoke, mere smoke, your tender hands only pushing green fuel into the fire. Wait, dear, wait a few months, even you will burst into a bright flame—like a butterfly from a common looking chrysalis——."

Kedari went on piling one confused metaphor on another, but with troubled and diminishing faith in himself and his own clever figures of speech.

Kokilam thought it was no good arguing and kept silent.

Kedari dared not tell Kokilam of the election for which he had resolved to stand. The cost of elections had been but dimly realised by Kedari

himself when he had contemplated the conquest of Delhi. Kokilam's lament added to the chillness of the midnight.

Kedari reversed the engines of thought and recollected the plainness and the simplicity of his college and high school days. Ramu's gentle figure swept through his brains and added to his trembling. But he resolved, not without a sigh, like Napoleon on the eve of Waterloo, that as there was no going back in his career he must fight—for victory or death.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE SMILE OF THE FARMER

WHILE Kedari was thus planning big, Ramu had almost completed his pilgrim tour to Palni and Rameshwar. Originally he thought of spending a day at Alavanti, at least to catch a glimpse of Sita and hear the trend of news in his village for the last so many years ; but he was obliged to return to Dusi on urgent official business in order to give the final finishing touches to his lake renovation scheme. This took him some months more of hard work and it was just completed in time to catch in full the monsoon floods in the Palar.

The river Palar is an eccentric and wild one which takes its rise in the steep hills of Nandidrug and drains a portion of the Mysore plateau. When the monsoon does not fail on these hills, it pours torrential rains for a week and the river is a moving ocean of water a mile wide. The rest of the year, it is a tract of sand, scored over here and there with little springs. Therefore the prosperity of the Dusi-Mamandur lake depended on the capacity of the connecting channel to take in full the water required for the year in the one week of floods.

Ramu was eager to see with his own eye the success of his scheme. When the monsoon set in in right earnest it gladdened his heart. The connecting channel was a complete success. Within one night, the lake was half full and within forty-eight hours, it was full to overflowing—an event unknown within the living memory of the poor ryots. Not only was the Dusi-Mamandur lake full and the prosperity of the twenty-four villages assured for two years but the lake discharged for a week much surplus water which in turn went down to fill up a connecting chain of small irrigation tanks, many in number, lower down. There was a smile in the face of every one, the smile of the farmer at the prospect of a full harvest—a smile of peace and angelic sweetness, —a smile that edges no other form of success; the vakil's, the stockbroker's, the politician's, the diplomat's, the warrior's, the statesman's, even the king's.

Ramu himself was startled at the amazing prosperity insured by his somewhat dreamy adventure and innocent speculation. There was a huge demonstration of over fifty-four villages that blessed him with a rural simplicity of heart. When Ramu celebrated the Deepavali of the year which came a week after this plenty—Janaki was already an expectant mother. The trip to Rameshwar and the blessings of many bore fruit indeed.

"Dear, I am sure it is a boy, a little brother to Sita. The blessings of the poor will never go in vain."

Ramu could not find an answer. Paternity was to him same as immortality. That was the only subject on which his conceptions were not clear. He was perplexed and pleased.

Ramu celebrated the Deepavali with presents of new clothes to all friends, relations and dependants and ample display of crackers for the benefit of Sita who drank in the pleasure and the smoke through eyes, ears and nose, constantly clapping hands and wishing to send a cracker herself.

The next morning, Ramu received a big envelope stamped Government House. He was both surprised and pleased and broke it open eagerly and read its contents as follows:

Government House, Madras.

Dec. 7.

DEAR MR. RAMACHANDER,

I was very glad to read both officially and from *The Madras Mail* that your Dusi-Mamandur lake scheme was a perfect success—beyond all expectations. Not only was the lake benefited to its full but also the innumerable minor irrigation tanks linked together lower down, received a full supply from the surplus water. I am also glad to hear that those who turned predatory and

the neighbouring hill-gangs have now settled down into peaceful agriculturists. Your achievement is really creditable. A distinguished Indian friend of mine well-read in history told me the other day that you had brought back the prosperity of the Pallava kings to these poor villages. I am glad that I played some little part in putting it through.

But this success leads you to a more difficult work. For as His Excellency the Governor, who is well-acquainted with your work, says you have become quite indispensable. Probably you are aware that for the last three months Madras is at the mercy of a gang of daring and well-led dacoits. Just last night even my own bangalow was laid under contribution and I have lost some valuable and irreplaceable momentos and heirlooms. We have tried special police here for three months and the ablest officers are more clever at theories than in any real work done.

I dare say you know that I am now the first member of Council in charge of the portfolio for protection, police, etc. The police here give us a lot of fantastic stories about the criminals who have not spared even the Government House. In fact they bestow more attention on Englishmen, and men in the Civil Service and the Police. So much so, the Government are of opinion that some political revolutionaries and fanatics from Bengal guide the whole movement. But I don't

think that it is quite likely. I know you have not any experience of police work. But I would rather trust men like you, whose minds don't run in a groove. The task needs a man who will investigate the first causes. I can't think of another so well-fitted for this work.

Would you care to take up this work as a special officer? I will give you plenty of police assistance and place at your disposal our best resources. My own view is that it is the old, old, Nagalapuram gang of dacoits ever a pestilence to Madras, now led by some one who is bitterly opposed to Government. Recently the hereditary chieftain of the gang escaped from the Trichy jail. He was probably so much ill-treated there that he has begun a vendetta against Government. I already begin to view things as you do—half the misery in this world is man-made.

If you are agreeble to the work, please wire your reply immediately and join duty at Madras on Monday. With the best wishes of my wife and myself.

Yours sincerely,

H. CADELL.

CHAPTER XXXIX

RAMU'S NEW ROLE

RAMU accepted the offer after considerable hesitation, for Janaki was dead against this kind of work. She desired that Ramu should stay with her for the coming months, and the new job would mean separation, peril and constant travelling. But could he refuse the command of Mr. Cadell conveyed through a courteous letter? At last he resolved to go, assuring Janaki that he would just try a week in order to please Mr. Cadell and then fall back somehow.

Ramu left for Madras alone and saw Mr. Cadell duly on Monday. He had a long talk with the officers concerned and understood everything. The work seized him. He formulated his plans immediately and left for the foot of the Nagalapuram hills though expert opinion was against him and considered it the most perilous, wrong-headed thing to do. But Ramu believed in taking the offensive immediately and understanding the gang at its headquarters. He hoped to make them surrender by an enveloping attack, sudden and unexpected. Then reclaim them by generous treatment

afterwards. He took with him a select band of policemen.

Ramu arrived at the foot of the hills just where a steep bridle path went zigzaging to the crest. The hills were not very high but they were thickly wooded and jungly with small and thorny shrubs. The ascent was very steep. Ramu had to cross three such ranges before he could reach the settlement of the gang, scattered in a defile encircled by craggy hills all around. He heard also that there were plenty of wild pigs, cheetahs and snakes of several kinds.

It was just evening time when he reached the foot of the hills and pitched his camp there for the night. Sleeky cows well-fed on mountain grass roamed at large, tended by a sparse pastoral tribe who lived a simple life and never went out thieving like their neighbours on the hills. When Ramu tasted a pot of milk in the night, which had a rich flavour all its own, the like of which he had never drunk on the plains, he wished that he were a shepherd, one of the tribe, tending these fine flocks of cattle.

Nature was there fresh and lovely. The hill slopes were thickly wooded and blue. A stream close by babbled along in little cascades of child-music. A breeze laden with the rich scent of forest flowers blew. Everything was wild and beautiful. Man had not yet kindled his pale fire and blackened Nature with the soot and smoke of his ambition. Ramu

wished that he sat there under the deep shade of these hills, for ever and alone, with his life nourished and sweetened solely with the milk and honey that seemed to drip from nature.

When he turned from these thoughts to his own mission, he could not help philosophising. Why should these people at the foot, be so honest, pure and innocent, while their neighbours on the hills are such cruel dacoits ? Environment and heredity, he murmurred to himself. He retired for the night early, for he had covered forty miles during the day and hoped to ascend the hills and be at the stronghold ere break of dawn. He asked his men to be ready by two o'clock in the morning for the silent climb and the final surprise.

Ramu had hardly slept half-an-hour when there was an uproar in his camp. He was anticipated by the efficient spy system of the gang. His bag and baggage, rifles, ammunitions and swords were quietly seized by the invaders without a shot or shout. For all were fast asleep weary after the day's hard march. Ramu and all his men were made prisoners.

On the crest of the hills, the reception was ready for these men on an almost royal scale. The place was a spacious ledge of rock almost encircled by a clear pool of water into which a bubbling and perennial stream fell and broke away into the Arni river of the plains after a fine fall of water. Murugan and the chieftain of the gang—he who

escaped from the jail, were seated together on a broad, satin cushion. For Murugan was already a respected citizen of the hills, friend, philosopher and guide to these rough people to whom he brought the wisdom and the urbanity of the plains like oil to the skin. Thoppai was the commander-in-chief of the whole of the predatory tribe and he stood with an enormous whip in hand and a long pole lightly balanced under the arm pit. About a dozen torches shed a lurid light on the blue-black hills and a distant hyæna was howling like a jackal.

The spacious ledge was the floor on which the spoils were divided from time immemorial. On one side was the sheet of water and on the other was a deep cavern hollowing through a perpendicular rock, which hid the treasures of the bandit king. The crystal pool mirrored the whole scene,—the lurid torch lights, the over hanging cave, Thoppai with the whip, the placid Murugan, the rough hewn and stalwart bandit king and his hundreds of loyal and sturdy people who risked their lives for their chief and pursued their ancestral vocation with pleasure and pride.

When he was made a prisoner, the gentle Ramu knew no fear. He was surprised at his own courage. He enjoyed it as if it were an appointed episode in the plan.

"Sir," greeted a rough but juvenile voice, "you are the head of this party, I suppose. You are a welcome guest to these hills. I am the son of the chieftain sent

to welcome you. We injure civilised life only on the plains. I have orders from my master to take you all to our homes and show us our strength and then let you go, so that you might not fight a losing battle or persist on such a foolish errand again. We have honey and milk and ragi. We will feast you for a day. He who goes to these hills, even to injure us, are our guest royal. It is the mandate of my master, while others walk, you should be carried on this chair, for the ascent is steep and rocky and an untrained foot like yours will miss its hold on the slippery rocks and pebbles. Pray, get in."

"Pray, who are you?"

"I told you, sir, I am the eldest son of the chief."

"And heir-apparent to the throne. I accept your hospitality. Things are taking a turn I did not expect. It's a nice turn to be received here so cordially. Well, I will get into your *dholi*."

He got in and enjoyed the palanquin ride. While his camp followed him, like prisoners of war, mighty glad that their heads were not broken as the only expected good of such a foolish errand.

When Ramu reached the appointed place, the spacious ledge of rock, he was surprised at the sight.

Murugan saw Ramu and Ramu saw Murugan. Thoppai was straining his memory to make out the familiar face. It was a surprise which dazed the three for a moment and Murugan rose from his cushion and to the astonishment of all prostrated before Ramu.

"Is it you, Muruga. Do I believe my own eyes or am I only dreaming long? Is it you, Muruga? Tell me the story, whence, how and why, stranger than fiction—Oh! Now I see it all. Are you the Murugan who escaped with the chief and another. But how did you get into the jail?"

"Yes, Swami, I am Murugan, your old servant. I surrender myself to you and beg forgiveness. I would meekly and gladly receive judgment at your hands. I deserve death for many crimes. But the story of my life should be told. For I don't think I was the real evil-doer. Society drove me on to this and left me no chance to repent and live again a true life."

"But, Muruga, I gave you a fine garden and the means for honest living. And what a change is yours to these trackless hills! Tell me your story in full though I am your captive just now, yet I am your master, once indeed very kind to you."

"Swami, excuse my talking a little learned. I am now a scholar in the school of the world and my life has taught me many things. Pioneers in every line are punished for faults not their own. To take up the thread from where you left me many years ago—I returned home dancing with joy, for the pretty garden was mine ever more. When you gave me that great gift, you gave me more than I had need for—too many cubits for a beggar boy that he smothered himself beneath the very

folds of his own dress. I went in slowly but surely for the luxuries of life and in a subtle hour of fate picked up a taste for drink which the Sircar sold for money and rendered more attractive. Thoppai who stands there was my inspiring evil genius. You know our little village had then no toddy shop. The Sircar wanted to introduce one and it chimed in with my friend's taste and scheme and my own ambition. I became its renter to make gold from my cocoanut trees. This brought upon my head the curses of the poor and the vengeance of the rich. They never excused my *patta* of the garden—the prettiest in the village—a poor *padayachi* living like a *dorai* in a bangalow. This toddy shop ruined me immediately in the eye of the village and in the long run, my purse, my soul, my conscience, my industry, my thrift, my honesty, my safety and everything precious in civic life—and lastly it has landed me amidst these wild but very kind men in hilly tracts pursued by wild beasts and by you—wilder men. We are every moment of our lives at bay with man, god and beast. Oh! Swami, save, save us again, as you once did save me. We are not wicked, we want to be good citizens. Show us the way and send us not to jails or track us to death as the hound does the hare. Save us—Swami, God has sent you here in this holy hour of dawn for our salvation."

"But, Muruga, your story is not clear as to how you came to be the leader of a dacoit gang. Renters

of toddy-shops need not always ripen into leaders of bandits."

"Swami, I wanted to cut short my tale. Hence I passed over the bitter transition from freedom to prison lest I should accuse others. A toddy shop is a rendezvous for all and the renter holds the confessed secrets of many. There was a big rioting near our village on some agrarian trouble, wherein some police men were murdered. I knew the whole plot but I had no hand in it. But I was hauled up before the Sessions Judge who never bent his mind in sympathy to put himself in my place and understand me and my case. Of course, I spent my all, over vakils, police and friends and such kindred race and got a conviction for one year. I was innocent. But I was guilty in a higher sense. I vended liquor to poor men and robbed their daily food. Now I see it all—God is great and just."

"He does not stand in need of your compliment just now, Muruga. Why did you not go back to your own village? How did you happen to get your present leadership?"

"How could I go and where should I go? An escaped prisoner—is he not a leper? Thoppai rebelled from prison and I followed him with the chieftain. The chieftain gave us an asylum in our hour of trouble when life was in mid-air. He heard my story and sympathised. He assured me a safe home in these hills. These rugged men whom

you hunt to death are finer in virtue, character, truth and compassion than those citizens who swarm your towns in the walks of civilised life. We have never robbed the poor till now. Show us the way to earn our food and we would gladly leave these hill-dens."

"Well, Muruga, you are true and thoughtful as ever. A single false step has ruined you—the toddy shop and the ambition of your friend. But how many are you in these low hills?"

"We are three hundred families in all. We have plenty of money—more than three lakhs. Take the whole. At least one warrant lies against the head of each. Cancel it. Turn us to the plough and make us peaceful citizens of the world. Give us each three acres of land and a cow. We will work day and night for the production of the true wealth of the world. We will grow oil-seeds, cotton and corn and help to nourish the life of towns. We will grow fruits and flowers and most delicious things for aristocrats. Clap us not in jail. It rewards neither—" Murugan faint with emotion, prostrated before Ramu.

Ramu thought for a moment and said slowly. "Rise up, Muruga, no fear. A thought strikes me. Memory of you brings back old recollections and ideals. This Arni river—the playful child of your hills, has a good supply of water in monsoon time but wastes itself into the sea in a day. I will move the Government and build for you with your

money and labour, a fine masonary dam just where the river breaks out of the valley into the plains and convert in a year, yonder fine flat of land many miles square, now grown with brush-wood, into a smiling village with fields for all of you. I will give you on the opening day, a gift of a plough-share for each."

Thoppai's mind wandered hither and thither in one utter bewilderment. He did not believe his own eyes. But slowly the truth dawned upon him—that the divine looking stranger was none but Murugan's Swami, Ramu of Alavanti. He stood transfixed by the eyes and voice of Ramu, like a tree rooted to the soil, receiving still and meek, a gentle shower of rain on a summer day, undisturbed by wind.

The chieftain even on the very day he knew Murugan became a changed man. The farmer's love of peace that always shone in Murugan's eyes, put a kindred beam in the chieftain's. So he gladly relinquished his predatory sceptre into the leading hands of Thoppai and lived in peace. Murugan was to him, his *guru*. The chieftain simply followed him and took the strange turn of events without surprise and beheld in Ramu a new vision of life, a revelation.

CHAPTER XL

A LITTLE BAR OF SAND

THE elections were over and the triumph was bright and complete for Kedari. It was a just reward in a society highly complex and organised, for courage, industry, intelligence, unsparing work and foresight. The will to achieve always achieves. His sensitive and jealous friends who till now shied at and slandered Kedari in secret came out the loudest in praise of the inevitable. Kedari discovered friends everywhere. The rich and the poor vied with one another to entertain him, and make pleasant his upward journey to Delhi, with fond and secret hopes that Kedari might have a corner for the entertainer when the first chance came. Kedari even forgot for a moment the utter bankruptcy into which his splendid success involved him—the plight of his wife and children at home, which he screened with a dexterity which he alone could invent.

Mr. B. Markandam Iyar was also elected to the local Council but not with such a majority or triumph which Kedari had.

Though Markandam was somewhat alarmed at the rapid success of his young friend at the bar, he never dreamt that he would so soon scale the heights of fame or the Imperial walls of Delhi. In fact, he was secretly rejoicing that Kedari was forcing his pace and would soon sprain his ankle. No doubt the entertainments were got up to honour both but Kedari was easily the chief guest even as Delhi easily out-distanced Madras in all matters. Crowds and coteries pressed for a touch of his hands—Napoleonic success is just the thing which the world adores. Even Mr. B. Markandam Iyar had to join in the general applause in a prominent manner and shout the loudest at least to save his own embarassed feelings. For man is strangely pleasant and servile before power.

Kedari had more tea-parties and functions in his honour than Markandam. For his many improvised friends, young and old, gathered round him in his hour of success and spoke in sure accents of his high destiny. Delhi, the seat of central power had so much attraction. This sudden and general preference for Kedari on the part of his own friends and followers, somewhat injured Markandam's pride, especially as Kedari made a point of it. When Markandam asked Kedari to stand for the Assembly at Delhi, one idea that vitalised his suggestion was that his young friend would surely be defeated.

A month had passed after the elections. The last grand entertainment was just over on the well-laid grounds of Thakurdoss gardens—the mansion of a Gujarati merchant prince. In the moon-lit night, it was the little Taj of Madras. It had the lovely, melancholy mausoluem look, nestling as it did, untenanted and in lonely splendour, on the fringe of the huge city of Madras.

Most of the guests had departed but a few still sauntered on the marble halls and the open terrace, drinking the pale moonlight with greedy eyes.

Mr. B. Markandam and Kedari enjoyed together the open air of the terrace and the spacious scenery bathed in the moonlight. Markandam buried his slight and short figure in the huge inside of a cushioned chair. Kedari, agile and free, was seated on a little cane chair which tilted badly on the smooth floor as it had uneven legs. He did not know why he selected it. He was unwilling to change for a better. He did not know why. He was in a peculiar fit of modesty. He wished that all this distinction should seem to sit light on his brow.

It was the loftiest terrace in Madras and commanded the most picturesque view. Beyond the screen of avenue trees and scattered gardens, one could see the railway track from the terrace. Soon a whistle was heard and the rumbling of a heavy train which went patter, clatter, attempting speed

and dragging on its load of pilgrim traffic from Kashmir to Assam to the sacred, calm and ocean-swept Island of Rameshwar. It was the Ceylon Boat Mail.

From the terrace, Kedari saw the moving train in a cleavage of dense green. The train was lit with electric lights—the innovation for the year, which meant the death of the old, old race of *masaljis*. The lamps twinkled a little paler for the blue moon. Kedari's eyes were sad with thoughts of the past. There was a strange music in the moaning voice of the moving train. His thoughts were hurled back as if he scented a flower which he had but scented once many many years ago.

"Well, Markandam," said Kedari in a low tone, "this moving train reminds me of many things—takes me back to my college days. I lived once in this self-same road when I was a student, far lower down the road, of course. It was the lowest rung in the ladder. It was a modest little house at the other end of the road. My friend Ramu taught me to listen to the voice of moving trains. It had a meaning and a message for us. We gazed at it in wonder and philosophy. Little did I dream then that I would—"

He changed his voice to a modest note and continued.

"Ramu used to say then that the higher one goes, more uneasy is one's life. I would then scorn at the old proverb about the crowned head and the king

which was meant to befool the world. The higher one goes, one sees better, I would argue then. Now I rather agree with him. Ramu was one of my finest friends at college—noble, sober, philosophic, thoughtful—but I have not seen him these years except once, a fleeting moment while in your car. It is my fault, I did not cultivate him."

"What is he, now?" asked Markandam listlessly.

"He was once a camp-clerk at Cuddapah, under Mr. Cadell, now Member of Council. Probably he is now a head clerk there."

"A camp clerk! If it is the same Ramu you mean, he is now the most respected and admired of government servants. I have heard of him. Mr. Cadell thinks that he is an angel and adores him. He is known to H. E. the Governor who thinks no less of him—as an ideal officer. He is now put to special work in charge of the recent political dacoities. I would not be surprised if he is made a Collector soon. He is reckoned as the future Member of Council, in informed circles. Mr. Cadell will instal him in his *gadi* before he retires. I believe he is the same Ramu whom you mention. Was he your class-mate?"

"Yes, my classmate and intimate friend. Gentle Ramu—a future member of the Executive Council! I never dreamt that he could come up so quick—"

Kedari was really stunned. "Ramu did not at all write to me of his success. What a pity! I lost touch with him. Are you sure he is the same man?"

"Yes, there is only one camp-clerk Ramu adored by the secretariat and Mr. Cadell."

This bit of news worked like magic. Kedari went into a reverie. Mr. Markandam Iyar watched him intently with a side glance. Kedari's mind went into many by-ways of thought and he could not help reviewing his entire philosophy of life in the light of Ramu's success. The whole thing seemed impossible.

"Are you sure?" Kedari asked again.

"I am sure, if your friend was once the camp-clerk. He is affectionately known even now to his friends as camp-clerk Ramu."

"Have you ever seen him?"

"No."

Kedari plunged again into a reverie. Markandam too had his own train of thoughts. During the last week things were shaping or were being shaped in a curious way for Kedari. Markandam with the falcon's eye for the crane, saw always the fall of others much earlier and occasionally helped in and speeded the fall. He with a simple smile and a lisp, gave a turn to the potter's wheel which kneaded the post-election clay of Kedari's life.

Mr. Markandam thought that it was the most appropriate moment to touch the chord, when a cloud hid the moon and wiped out the soft moon-light with hurricane speed. Kedari slightly shuddered, for the darkness fell in ominously

chiming with his own brooding thoughts for the future.

"But this cloud-wrapped moon," Markandam faintly attempted a figure of speech, "reminds me of our own life. These elections have made us spend money like water—."

"I was just thinking so—sir, in my case, I must be frank and free with you. It has made me bankrupt and the future is dark for me like the sky without the bright silver disc—nature's own. I implore you to help me—" said Kedari in an unusual voice of entreaty.

Markandam was fully aware month by month of Kedari's financial difficulties. "Ours is a wastrel profession, Kedari—and even I after so many years, have not saved much—my house has grown into a palace and a choultry. It has swallowed half my innings—"

"Indeed so! To use my friend Ramu's words, if we exploit others, we are in turn exploited by others. If we take a hundred rupees for scrawling three lines on an affidavit—the tyres and the tubes are made to burst—the oil companies, the contractor, the mason and the bricklayer and a hundred others around us feed in turn upon our blood. Life is a strange knot. For the thinker it is a cruel one. For the man of action, an unceasing yarn of minor knots and riddles, ever unravelled."

"It is quite true, Kedari," affirmed Markandam.

"I must put my house in order. And I need now at least twenty thousand to pin the sails and float the flag. If you, sir, my master, my helper, friend, philosopher, and guide, don't help me now, who will? I will repay you in two years. I am earning well and I will use my position at Delhi to double my rates."

"But Kedari—and I really wish to help you in time. But I fear there is a little bar of sand which you should tide over. It is nothing I know for one of your sailing strength. I wanted to warn you of it—a week ago when the plan was hatched by your enemies—I tried to break it—I did not wish to mar the pleasant functions in honour of your success—the Chetti is filing a petition to set aside your election."

Cautiously and in a moaning voice Mr. Markandam gurgled, these words with the eyes of a cat on a serpent. The claws were in but ready for the mortal plunge on the shining head.

"To set aside my election!" cried Kedari like a soldier shot at the nape of the neck from an ambush.

"Yes, yes—it is so. It is an up-hill fight. Some of your friends too are going to the other side."

"I did not know it at all! One month I have been fooling over these tea-parties and lost my scent in coffee vapours. I should have put my foot and crushed the fire before the smoke was seen—why

did you not tell me earlier, friend Markandam? What a pity!"

"I tried to stamp it out for you and save you the anxiety that would mar your pleasant hours of victory. Still I have hopes it would not be serious. We shall put it down by our joint efforts. But if the petition is put in, it would be up-hill work for you—for—"

"For—?"

"For the charges are likely to be proved as they are true—corruption, bribery, and etc.,—how could an election be fought clean?" energetically uttered Markandam.

"But I only acted as you did and under your advice and leading. We did the same thing, over and over again together—" said Kedari bitterly.

"So is life, Kedari. Pity it is so. Many thieve but a few alone are caught—usually he who steals more than he could carry."

Mercilessly spoke Markandam in a voice shedding meek pity and continued—"This Delhi business is a more serious and central thing. Who cares for local Councils? So you will have to bear the brunt of the fight. Of course, I will help you with my influence. I shall not leave you alone in your hour of peril."

Even Mr. B. Markandam Iyer, an old bandicoot with a quarter of a century of experience in hiding feelings could not keep back an inward chuckle heard deep down his throat.

Kedari perceived it. He felt like a fatted pig that was being noosed for the slaughter-house by friend and foe alike, amidst a common clap of hands. He was in no mood for further conversation. His magic mind understood every thing. He was sure that Mr. B. Markandam Iyer was playing a deep game in which all the low and high estate of man—the strength of the brute, the agility of the bird, and the brains of man, played in fine team to hit the ball into the goal.

CHAPTER XLI

A DREAM

KEDARI had a primitive fascination for water, collected or flowing. He loved the seashore and the lake side and would stand for hours at the water's edge, solemn and still like wind in rain. Ramu had taught him the liquid beauty of assembled waters. Kedari had it deep down his nature. But Ramu had to plumb it for him and set free the passion.

Ramu always voted for the tiny, emerald-like ripples or the gentle waves on a sleeping sea, that died in ever enlarging circles a peaceful death on the shore. But Kedari loved only the mighty rollers in the monsoonish hour. It did but paraphrase the lives of both.

The most pathetic and inspiring sight on the sea is when a mighty wave, advancing with raised head, like a huge serpent, reaches its full power, and in the very act of striking as a harmonious whole, trembles on the crest. A gleam of white, like lightning, shivers through the dark blue crest and crashes the whole into drops of confusion—spray and foam. The wave that struggles beyond

and much above the sea is beauty that is spelt with death. Ambition is like the wave of the monsoonish sea, ever grand and ever perishing.

Kedari was always full of these land and sea metaphors which he had fixed in his mind like so many milestones on the road. They inspired him to action, taught him and guided him. He had a strange fascination for and a remote kinship with the sea. But the shimmering white on the crest of the wave escaped his eye and never struck him with its true significance. But now he understood it and was prepared for the crash.

When Kedari returned home from the garden party in his honour in Thakurdoss gardens, he did not speak a word to his wife who was already asleep, snug in among her children, peacefully reposing like a true mother. Kedari did not sleep but analysed calmly the coming events. He took stock of his position and mind. Sure he hated the frog-like life of security, peace, timidity and smallness. That was why he succeeded. But Ramu too did, if Markandam's account was not manufactured for the sole joy of spiting him and enhancing his own malevolent pleasure.

Kedari knew that there would be one day a terrible clash between Markandam and himself. But he did not expect it so soon and even hoped to avoid the collision by clever driving. He was now a member of the Imperial Assembly and a pioneer in many things, for his age. He had to leap the

precipice first and show the way to craven youngsters. Pioneering carried its own penalities as well as its fine laurels.

He did the leaping with characteristic genius and daring. The rock on the other side of the chasm was somewhat steep and slippery and the foothold not sure. Friends and enemies propose to pelt him now with stones from the other side. Well, let them. He would patiently collect the scattered stones of insult and build a castle before their very eyes. He would not live even for a day the frog-like life of his fellow men.

Kokilam turned in her bed and murmured some strange words. Kedari sat on his and watched. The silent moon shone out unruffled by breeze or cloud. Kedari, at the supreme moment of his happiness, felt annoyed at vague fears—all Markandam's jealous mischief. The morning would teach him that Kedari was no man to be trifled with. He tried to compose himself to sleep. He could not, for the dinner was heavy, the thoughts were oppressive and Markandam had vilely heated his brain.

Kokilam murmured again in her sleep as if she had an ugly dream. Kedari could lie idle no longer. He stepped to her side murmuring, "It is rare that Kokilam prattles. Poor thing! in my pride of car and election, I have clean forgotten her these months and neglected my children. How poor the whole lot looks in the ragged beds.

Kokilam is mild. She should assert her rights a little more. However, hereafter, there is time and scope for mending if only—. I will cut down and fix my budget and save some little against a rainy day. Dear Kokilam, what ails thee, love ?"

"Is it you, dear ? You have come at last. Dear, what is the time of night now ? I had a dreadful dream just now. If it is but a *jamam* for sunrise, it will come true, alas ! it is a terrible dream —about you—dear—be careful—"

"What is the dream, tell me ? I am no funk. Tell me." He put her head on his lap and passed his palm across her wet eyes.

"It is dreadful, dear. You are asked to climb a steep hill and then at the end leap over a deep chasm with a foaming river below. A mob cheers you at first to the echo. You do it splendidly and alight, like a bird, on the other side. Others—your competitors do likewise but not so well. You win the prize. But you are exhausted after the leap and you faint a little. The rock is steep and slippery and your feet miss their hold a little—and lo ! your competitors pull your leg—the spectators throw stones at you from behind your back—you are pushed down the deep chasm and you go down heels over head with a terrible shriek—deep below there is a little stream of bubbling water, hidden almost from view by rank growth of forest trees on hill slopes—I hear the splash of water but see you no more.

I cry and awake—seeing you I am comforted that it was only a dream, dear."

Kokilam who rarely wept, sobbed like a child.

"Be comforted, it is only a dream," Kedari trembled while he spoke.

"What is the time now, dear?"

"Three o'clock, yet two hours to daybreak."

"Alas! it will come true, dear. Be warned. Some great peril awaits you, some disgrace, dishonour or some danger to life. I am the daughter of an astrologer not in vain."

"Impossible! nothing like it, dear, it is only a bad dream, Kokilam, due, I fear, to some kidney trouble. You have not been doing well these months. I saw it from your looks. You should assert your rights a little more, dear. I shall call in the doctor to-morrow. Civilisation gave me no rest till now to nourish my domestic life. I am changed. I will be ever by your side hereafter."

"See, dear, how my left eye throbs—some evil it portends. Oh! God—save us and my children—"

Kokilam wept profusely. And Kedari could not hold out any longer administering false comfort. His heart was weeping within. He threw open the surplus weir of strong natures—the eyes as well to drain the excess of spring water within, lest it would break the bunds of the heart. Nothing consoles a man like weeping eyes. In half an

hour, both were soundly asleep again, fast and snug each in the other's clasped arms, for mutual strength and courage which Love in embrace always gives.

CHAPTER XLII

THE LAST FLICKER OF THE FLAME

RAMU was again at Madras with the difficult work of securing citizenship and food for the outlawed hundreds of the Nagalapuram hills. He was diffident whether his novel idea would be accepted by the Government. Thanks to Mr. Cadell's implicit faith in Ramu, his mission proved a success. The press and the public supported his humanitarian schemes. His Excellency the Governor also was personally happy that he could crown his quinquennium with some lasting deed of benefit to the poor, instead of merely keeping the administration going for the good of the ambitious, the grasping and the rich.

One day Ramu was walking on the beach. He accidently heard a young man, apparently a vakil saying to his fellow, "Poor Kedari! he went up like a rocket. He is down in a day, not even a burnt stick. He has fled from Madras, leaving his palatial house, wife and children."

Ramu, even in the midst of his own engrossing work, knew that Kedari was now in troubles,

shooting the rapids in the somewhat zig-zag course of his career. He read of his election to the Assembly and rejoiced—at the numerous entertainments got up in his honour. He knew of the petition to set aside his election. He pitied his bad luck but hoped he would succeed eventually.

But when he heard that he had fled from Madras, thoughts of Kokilam and her children came to him. He resolved to see them at once. Meanwhile the newsboy announced in sonorous tones the evening edition of *The Hindu*. He flung a nickel piece and obtained a copy. Ramu rarely went through the news column, local or foreign but enjoyed only the extracts and cuttings. But he found in flaming head-lines, "Kedari's election to the Assembly set aside. Grave charges of corruption and impropriety found." He had not the heart to go through the details but hurried to Kedari's palatial residence in the Tank Square.

Indeed the beach gossip was not untrue. Kedari anticipated the judgment in the election petition for, at every move of his in court and out of court he was out-manoeuvred and defeated not by superior talents or by more upright character but by a plentiful use of money. If he had but or even if he could have but raised upon the credit of his future industry and income only ten thousand rupees, victory would still have been his and even fresh entertainments assured for his passing through the

ordeal unscathed and character vindicated in the public eye.

A poor man may forge ahead by mere pluck and courage to the ranks of the rich. Once he joins them, he must vary his methods. Money alone will tell and daring brains are only a good second help.

The moon-lit night on the open terrace of the Thakurdoss Gardens had wrought in Kedari a silent, philosophic change. Ramu too with entirely different methods had succeeded in life if Markandam's report was true. We work for certain things, tooth and nail, hours and years. We almost succeed and in the very fateful hour of success, the joy is marred with a cloud of unshed tears. The whole thing loses its savour. The gold is touched with too much copper. The beautiful wave had over-wrought itself and must perish on the shore in utter confusion.

And at the root of all his philosophy and depression lay, Kedari recognised, the hard clay of a solid debt of twenty thousand rupees. The plant had blossomed early by careful surface-soil manuring. But the roots could no more go deeper down till the hard clay was burst through. The bursting seemed once possible. But his friends had stolen away the spade and the pickaxe. With his bare fingers, the task was well-nigh impossible. His heart yearned for a friend.

So Kedari in a sharp moment of resolution, decided to quit Madras, and see Ramu and prostrate before him, beseech his pardon and tell him his story as he once did, friendless and alone in the corridors of the Christian College while they both together sought admission. So he left Madras in search of Ramu, not knowing that he was at the same time in Madras.

When Ramu stepped into the fine residence of Kedari it was just six and the mellow light of the evening flooded the tank, the temple and the streets. The temple bells chimed the matin hour of prayer and worship of the All-High. The tank and the temple are situate in the middle of the square and the streets run on all the four sides to the tank. The cars, rich and luxurious, glided along the streets to and fro with languid ladies decked in diamonds and draped in all the colours of the butterfly. The mark of opulence was on every brick and stone. It was the Vakil Tank Square into which the litigous streams of twenty-five counties came pouring, in fair weather and foul. Half-a-century ago, it was a wild waste with a few priests who did service in the temple.

Kedari's own house was one of the finest in the square, polished and bright with shell-lime, shining whiter and smoother than alabaster. Ramu began to doubt if he was not making a mistake about Kedari's recent history or his house. But Kedari's name shone in the front in clear-cut brass letters,

gilded and smiling. The office room was amply furnished in choice rose-wood and rows of leather-bound books that told their tale of a busy profession. The front door was a little ajar and Ramu cast a look in and a look at himself—he was not very well-dressed and felt ill-suited to the surroundings.

A tall, slim and graceful figure with liquid eyes that spoke of a loving nature was plaiting the hair of a little girl of ten, surrounded by a nice group of children with the youngest thumping the back of her mother calling and crying for attention to her. Yes, it was Kokilam—the lady of the house. Ramu had seen her but once on her marriage day, a shy and faint hour, many, many years ago. Even then she was beautiful. But the dim memory was now bleached to nothing by the length of time. But at sight of her, it revived like faded grass in spring.

Ramu was glad to find that in the midst of all this show, she was but plainly dressed and was doing homely work. He expected to see a corpulent lady in gorgeous green silk, reclining on a lounge with a book in hand and a world-weariness about her eyes. The mother was so intent on her children and her own thoughts that she did not notice the new comer darkening the passage at the front door. Ramu in a voice that was his own and which was ever beautifully stirred to a rich and charming cadence in the presence of the fair sex, called out, "Is Mr. Kedari at home?"

Even without her looking up, came the reply, "No."

Ramu lingered a trifle longer seduced by her fine presence and beautiful eyelashes. Kokilam lifted her head mechanically to see if the stranger had gone. Their eyes met. Ramu instinctively turned away and retraced his steps to the street. But Kokilam felt a flood of light through her being, like a lotus-bud touched by the rising sun—a dream resolving into a vision of life. She had but a very dim memory of Ramu's face, only once seen with stolen glances on her wedding day in the marriage bustle, many years ago. She cast her looks high up towards the wall. There hung a photo of Ramu to which there was not a day she had not tendered her homage of grateful looks for all he had done her husband. Ramu's photo-image was engraven in her heart. She recognised Ramu at once, as only women could. She instinctively stood up and asked her eldest girl to run up and call in the stranger *mama* who had just left. Ramu returned, surprised but with a secret glow in his heart. And he could not believe his eyes when Kokilam approached Ramu and kneeled before him.

"Forgive me, if I am immodest, sir. In this crying hour of grief for us, Lord Kapaleswar has sent us a tried friend indeed—a brother. My husband is away these three days—I know not where, and these children—"

"Rise up, Kokilam, how do you know me?"

"The photo on the wall is engraved in my heart. My husband has been ungrateful to you these years. But now—"

"What is the trouble, Kokilam? When last time I was here at Madras, Kedari's name was the uppermost and worked like magic. I fear the election has led him astray and ruined him—"

"The election is but the ripening of the evil that took hold of my lord long time ago when he left you. Ambitious and daring, spending all that he got and inventing a philosophy for it—"

Ramu was struck with the intellectual note of her answers.

Kokilam continued, "I wish to ease my mind and heart with a full tale to you—our benefactor. Bear me, sir, a brother's love. Stay here, for the night. Kedari has a hospitable heart. Touched by your presence, an unseen power may carry him the news and make him return in an hour—"

"I understand you quite well, Kokilam—I am proud and glad to see you, so simple and true in this hour of trouble, with your children round you. It was I, you may not know, who urged your claims, through an intuitive eye on your chart, and asked Kedari to choose you—"

"Yes, I know, sir—" Kokilam acknowledged with a very slight blush, "Honour us by dining with me and my children to-night. That Kedari is not here, need not tell on you and stand in the way—I am—"

"No, no, Kokilam. It is not that. I will call upon you to-morrow morning with Janaki. I want to talk with you many things. She will be here to-night. I have sent a man to bring her here. She will remain here for a month or so. She is expected by the seven o'clock train—"

"Then I will send the car to the station and fetch her here straight."

"Mother, ask *mama* how many babies has *mami*—" asked the girl who called him in.

"Yes, she has put you my question."

"A girl and a little boy, child," he said patting her on the cheek. The children clapped hands and giggled.

"Send the car!—not at all necessary. If a man goes to the station to direct her here, she will come in a jutka, we are quite used to—"

"But when there is a car, why not? Its days too are numbered. Why not have it perhaps on its last drive on such a noble errand?"

"Why do you give me so depressed a tale, Kokilam"—

"You will know the whole story by and by. Everything is lost. The game is up. If the election is set aside, as it will be, my lord is a ruined man."

Ramu did not tell her the latest news.

"Nothing like a peaceful, village life, with its small round of pleasure and pain. Madras is a huge waste and my husband's ambition knows no

end. It has ruined us and he knew not a day of rest."

"I always thought and said so. But Kokilam you need not lose heart. Kedari is of the finest stuff. The atmosphere has ruined him. He will soon be alright."

"I fear it is too late. If you were here a year or two ago—" murmured Kokilam.

They went talking in this strain till eight when the car announced its arrival. Not only Janaki and her children but also Kedari stepped down.

Kedari jumped from the car and touched the feet of Ramu in a long, low *namaskaram*, and said in a voice weighted with repentance and sorrow, "Forgive me for my sins, Ramu—at least in the name of our college love. My ingratitude! I have already heavily paid for my wrongs. I see it all now—but alas too late!"

"Kedari, this kind of greeting is most unseemly and antiquated between friends."

"I am the younger and I owe everything to you. Nothing less than touching your feet will solace me. It is the only token of a great change. It is for this touch that I left Madras three days ago in search of you—and met Janaki at Dusi and in time to start together."

"Well-contrived! There is an auspicious look about this—"

"From this hour, I begin a new day and a new life. Ramu, accept me your slave—"

"Say, friend as of old, I will—"

Ramu said after a moment's pause, "I am not sorry—that your election has been set aside—ambitious high life is a hateful thing—"

"Election set aside! Has the judgment been delivered! But I knew the result beforehand—so I am not surprised—"

"Yes, it is so, in the evening papers—"

"Well, let it be so, and Markandam rejoice. I have a hundred things to say to you, Ramu. Let us go out now. Let Janaki and Kokilam know each other fully. The night is full and beautiful with the moon, like a white rose in the sky. Let us spend an hour on the beach as of old. Reshape my life. I will never more be a vakil but a hermit walking in your wake—"

"In my wake!—I am not a hermit but a full dressed and foolish official busy with a hundred things—"

"But you act like a hermit in the midst of work. In three days, I have learnt the meaning and message of your life, which I did not and could not learn till now—my vision is changed."

"Yes, Kedari, let us spend an hour on the beach after supper. The moon-lit night is a philosopher and a great reconciler."

—————

CHAPTER XLIII

HOMELY TALK

KEDARI was a silent and indifferent diner, heating his brain with schemes while mechanically driving the hand to the mouth. But Kokilam was always a charming host, kind and hospitable to the poor and the rich alike. The presence of Ramu gave her a peculiar elation which only a woman's heart knows to spell. Ramu as a guest in her house was a god-like presence for her. Her feet seemed to float in air with the joy of a new devotion. Kokilam served the dinner to Ramu with her own hands with a touching delicacy and devotion. Even Kedari who sat with him felt a magic change in the atmosphere and in his general attitude towards guests and his own stomach. He felt the elementary pleasures of eating and recognised in it for the first time a holy act of creation which should be done in a spirit of worship. Ramu always spiritualised the decorous silence of the rich. The dinner was over, which Ramu relished exceedingly, because the overhanging sweetness of Kokilam gave it a flavour that pen cannot

transcribe on paper. Soon both Ramu and Kedari drove to the beach.

Janaki still retained the child-like wonder of her juvenile years. She had already heard of the riches and luxury of Mylapore while she lived poorly at No. 15, Muthu Mudali Street. But the splendour of Kedari's house bewildered her at first sight. She wondered at Kokilam even more. Her tall figure and lambent beauty, her well-featured and refined face, her native kindness and her distinction and ease of talk were a new world in the feminine to Janaki who gazed at her in simple admiration even as her own child, Sita, marvelled at the bulbed electric lights in Kedari's house.

"A couple of hours ago," Kokilam began the conversation after meals, chewing the betel-leaf with ease and grace as if they set free her charming flow of words, "I never dreamt that God would bless me with a friend in our present troubles."

"What troubles for you, Kokilam, the singing bird on the tree? I can't understand you. Kedari also talks in a like fashion. I see a royal household here with pomp and power, which I am half-ashamed to gaze at in rustic wonder. You look like a queen with grace and beauty. Kokilam, you lack nothing. There is no need at all for your weary looks or sad voice. With wealth and children it is the brightest home I have seen. Kedari is lucky."

"But, dear Janaki, all this glitter covers a lot of ugly things within. You don't know town life. This high life, false and showy, runs like a rot unseen within the flower. I shall tell you the whole story presently—"

"I shall not hear then anything of that story. I am mighty happy with you. Mar it not with your sad and sentimental tales. You know I am a distant cousin of Kedari—"

"Yes, I know—"

"Do you also know that I owe my Ramu to his exertions on my behalf when my mother and I were alone, poor and unfriended—"

"That too I know, but it was only a service in return, for Ramu fixed me for my lord—"

"That was somewhat in an indirect way—"

Meanwhile Sita came to her mother, "Mamma, what a beautiful house this is, bright and gay like a fairyland! Why not we live here for ever—all the children have plenty of dolls—why not get a toy motor-car for my little brother—mother—he cries for it—"

"Your father is not rich, Sita. You cannot have them."

"Why is he not, mother? He too has servants, shirts and coats and a walking stick and people to salam him—"

"Ask father when he comes."

"Dear Sita, all these are yours. Take them, as many as you please. Don't believe your mother.

Your father is the richest man in the world—" Kokilam said in a voice weighted with an unshed burden.

"Yes, he is the kindest pappa, but mother is always cross and angry with me. When she pinches me, I go to my father sobbing and he pats me on the back till I laugh looking at his face and kiss him over head and shoulders."

Kokilam and Janaki went chatting on for hours on many things till sleep overcame Janaki and her limited range of subjects. Kokilam thought that Janaki was the sweetest, prettiest and simplest child. She adored her, such a simple script in flesh of nature's most complex life. Janaki could not comprehend Kokilam or her surroundings fully but knew that there was a rare and rich charm in her. Kokilam waited wide awake an hour more for Ramu's and Kedari's return from the beach but in the very eagerness she slowly drifted into sleep before they came.

CHAPTER XLIV

THE MOON-LIT NIGHT IS A PHILOSOPHER

SAND-DUNES on the beach are Nature's softest bed for the philosophic thinker and the seeker after truth. Ramu and Kedari reclined on these ever fresh heaps of sand mounded everywhere on the level foreshore.

The night was ripening quick. The roar of the evening pleasure-traffic was dying faintly on the beach road. The air was cool and still. The sea was gentle as a pond. The waves murmured and lashed to the shore the mildest of sea-songs. These were the friendliest hours for the land and the sea. In the sky, the Moon and the Venus rode together, like mother and daughter. A little behind them Jupiter shone, like the clearest diamond, a little pale-blue for the bright moon and the white sky.

Ramu stretched himself out on his back to full length on the sand. Kedari reclined with his head rested on his palm and turned sideways. There was peace and philosophy in and around, on land, sea, and sky.

"There shining, diamond-like in the heavens, Kedari, is Jupiter, the planet that rules over all noble life, the star that brings dignity and fame to one."

Ramu spoke to the moon.

"Then he must have been very weak in my natal hour. Tell me, Ramu, you are an astrologer. What is wrong with my chart? Is *guru* an evil star in mine—"

"I, an astrologer! Nothing is wrong in the chart but everything is wrong only with us. In town life and in the vakil profession, even the best placed Jupiter will go limping many miles to beg a pinch of snuff. The environment rules the world. Kedari, man is mere clay on the potter's wheel."

"But I never dreamt of this fall for me—Ramu, more sudden than the thunder that crashes all life. And again, I feel, that in this world there is no evenness of punishment. Look at my own case. Hundreds have done like me before and now. Where are they? They are preaching now from the highest pulpit the greatest moral for you and me. Why the very man, Markandam, who taught me these evil practices by example and theory, gets out unscathed and is sitting now in Council talking of the country's good and the commonweal of the world. It is a very cruel world. And such a man, out of the sheerest jealousy and ambition, in order to cut me off, a more powerful rival because younger, than he ever thought I would be,

plots against me after the election, at a time when he knew my financial weakness from my own mouth. If I had then but ten-thousand cash or credit, I would have hoisted him with his own petard,—and I would be ruling now the infant world of Indian politics from the Imperial city of Delhi!"

But Ramu squinted displeasure to the moon at this vein of talk.

Kedari recovered and continued in a changed and calm voice "Why should I let evil and passion grow again in my heart? I play no more the game. I have forsworn revenge even if I can. Let Markandam enjoy the fruits of his victory. I shall not think of him. What have I now in common with the ruling world?—nothing. But, Ramu, how do you justify my fall according to current standards?"

"Dear Kedari, you know, I can and I do justify nothing. It is all beyond us, reward and punishment, the first cause of men and things. It is unknown and unknowable. But we know certain things and that is enough river-craft to paddle along the bunded stream of life—venture not into the trackless sea. Judge not, that is the divine rule and the way to bliss. To judge and compare others, is to court misery and pain. Morality is no doubt a man-made rut. But the rules are laid on eternal truths with a vision of the cosmic law. Only the river, ridden and narrowed by the banks, reaches the ever-lasting sea. The idle and the

roaming water-drop dies ignobly in the swamp of its own wayward freedom. And for you, Kedari, you broke the bunds and let go your mighty self, raging and free, eating the sand-hills and flats that crossed the way of your infant fury, rejoicing in the foaming triumph of the moment—till you found yourself in a pit, without a way out. Ah! Kedari, even plunder and conquest have their moral laws. You ignored them. You piled far too quickly the stones and bricks before the cement could set. The edifice tottered at the slightest touch."

A fleece of cloud covered the moon and Ramu paused till the shining disc shone again.

"Kedari, the whole world is awry now. Many things are out of joint. They clash with each other for a new shape and form. Everything is in the melting-pot. And the mould is not yet ready. The fire sickens in the oven. The soot and the smoke fill the air and fatigue common labour. The master mind is yet to be and the mould is not yet ready for the new man of the century,—peaceful, soulful and nearer to God."

Ramu paused for breath, heaved a sigh and spoke again.

"For instance, I ask you, why should anyone get more than what he needs for the day? You went on, as a vakil, annexing the soul, life and toil of others, lower placed, at the ratio perhaps of one vakil's labour as equal to hundred tillers of the soil, till at last you too were annexed by the very

flow of events you have set free in this wide world."

"Then, do you preach, great Ramu, an utter life of inaction."

Kedari gasped, for his keen mind knew at once the roots of the new flowers of thought which Ramu threw in air as if to pelt the moon.

"You are right, Kedari, that is the ideal no doubt in a noumenal world. Man is struggling for a deep peace, a great inaction, through all this restless sweat and labour. The gift of eyesight means the gift of motion, a great, perilous and complex gift which needs to be nourished on a complex food. Life that is fated to earn its food, must act, must work, must strive. Action is misery for you and your fellow. For where action is, there conflict should be. There is no fire without the smoke. But still you must act in this transitional world till man reaches a higher plane of life, through misery and sorrow, through work and overwork, through injury, pain and loss. But act in such a way that you don't exploit another, don't annex the life and soul of another to prolong your wanton joys. Man, using motion and the gifts of motion, now for the base and initial purpose of winning food, will one day use it, to win cosmic freedom and consciousness, to roam at large among the silent stars, a sentient being and a quenchless figure of light, one with the universe and yet a separate soul which has tasted the secret springs

and waters of the cosmos. Such a being will never sweat for its food but take it direct as it roams in the pathless spaces of the universe, from the nourishing solar heat and the unshed waters of the cloud. All progress lies star-ward. Evolution is astronomic-cosmic."

"Then, then, Ramu, you plead that man would and should become a higher and a rarer, a flying kind of vegetable, receiving its food even without so much as waving its branch."

Kedari understood the drift of Ramu's poetic words.

"If you put it so, Kedari, it is not wrong. Only you look at things in another way. Your bright instinct and clear intelligence tear through the veil of words and see the substance within, a gift not vouchsafed to me. The vegetable is not a thing of contempt. It is our superior in a hundred ways. It is innocent. It does not sweat for its food. It does not kill its neighbour for its food. It does not exploit others for its food as you and I do every day. It smiles with fragrant flowers when the sun smiles and the gentle rain descends in a fertilising shower."

"But it is dull and still, Ramu—a thing from which all animal life seeks to escape. And man wants to be more, a good deal more. He wants to think and act and move about. The glory of motion has swept him from all primitive conditions of ease and peace into a higher world of joy. What is wrong then?"

"But look at the price he has paid for it! The price of locomotion is the loss of the gift to nourish yourself even as you stand with a morsel of innocent food from earth, air and water, which is the glory of all plant life. One gift of Nature takes away another."

"Then why not return to it?"

"Just so, that is what I say, Kedari. All life is yearning towards the vegetable in a higher sense. In the millennium to be, all gifts shall be ours. The glory of motion will be nourished on a painless and non-violent food, dripping from nature as sun-light drips from sun. The soul of Science is *ahimsa*, the redemption of all sentient life from violence to others and to itself and from the dull pain of muscular labour. The gifts of science are as great as those of religion. Mere thought will be power one day. We can then roam about sentient and alive,—through the universe, even without a pair of flying slippers, into which aeroplanes should end one day, for the mere asking, mere thinking, bathing our body, mind and soul in the purest light of the stars, merging and emerging like children playing hide and seek."

"A fine dream finer than this moon-lit night. Now, Ramu, we are grossly fettered but for these lovely dreams that cross our waking hours—"

"Yes, Kedari, life is now seemingly a viciou circle. We are going round and round. We eat that we may work. We work that we may eat,

over-doing each at every step. The higher surge of destiny says clearly into our ears, 'Life wants to escape from action, from all work'—that is why the leisured rich sweat not for their food but live idly and lead the world, lisping in soft tones, of Literature, Arts and Science and of the stars in the sky. Our civilisation is now in a wretched state, for we go on spinning only a cob-web and the breeze over-night sweeps it away. The future is certain in the eye of God, but man may delay the glorious day by his ignorant hours of spite, anger and hate. Let us fix our ideals for ever. One step on the right celestial track will do for me."

"But, Ramu, yours is a philosophy in a general way and good perhaps, in evolution's eye, a million years hence. I could not take in the whole. But I see your point. How would you work it out in this existing state—without breaking the running threads, the warp and the woof of our complex civilised life."

"It's the easiest thing to do, Kedari. Untwist the threads that have fallen now into a knot, patiently and steadily with a fixed eye. Begin it straight away. Do not labour for more food than you need for the day. Produce yourself the little you need. You have no right to enjoy the things which your own little fingers can't shape for your joy. It is a golden rule which will shed half your burden and misery and bring you much nearer God. Don't sweat for others. This selfish

rule bears the most selfless fruits. Then you will have the leisure for the richest dreams and the most pacific joys of life. This is the first step in the flight. This is the first rugged hill in a range of seven. Beyond lies the valley where life is even with the Gods, passionless, painless, hungerless, full and alive, and clad in the triple light of cosmic peace, love and knowledge."

Kedari did not understand but felt the magic of the streaming words which well-mixed with the moonlight. But he dared not interrupt.

"Kedari, half of our misery is self-inflicted and man-made. It springs from lack of courage to utter the Truth in thought, word and deed. Let none be enthroned in posts of power or focal positions. No man has a right to call for and command another, so that his word or action has a consequence on the freedom, mood or mind of another man. The purest deed is the one that never compels another to act. It is not enough, for the evolving world, to act simply without your mind upon the fruits of action. Act in such a way, if you have to, that action leaves no fruits for you or the outside world but are consumed in the very act itself. Then man will grow in freedom and beauty fair and pure, like the lilies in the field or the lotus in the tank. Act like this, with your eye on the radiant vision within, and not with a view to annex your fellow. You will surely reach one day the footstool of God."

"It is a new message, Ramu, perhaps not yet worked into details for me or the common world. It is too ascetic, new, and self-limiting. Is it possible? Will men in power and vested interests listen to your philosophic song?"

Ramu did not reply to Kedari's words but simply gazed at the moon which had ascended the middle sky and was in a line with Ramu's eyes, who lay motionless, stretched on the sand. Ramu seemed to listen to the chaunting murmur of the sea for a fresh wave of thought. Kedari waited long in silence for his friend to continue the song but he heard only the pure voice of the sea.

CHAPTER XLV

KEDARI'S NEIGHBOUR

THE next morning the day broke in Kedari's home with a peace and joy it had not known for many years.

Kedari in the magic presence of Ramu attained a great measure of tranquillity. The child-like freshness and vivacity and the open laughter of Janaki gave Kokilam a new taste of life. Ramu and Kedari left the house for an early morning walk among the green and winding garden roads of Adyar. Janaki's fascination for the streaming crowd revived in full, and supported by Kokilam she stood on the verandah watching the wealth of detail and the spacious opulence of the Tank Square. Just then a beautiful car drew up majestically at the next house and Janaki commented.

"Dear Kokilam, everyone seems to have a car here in Mylapore—fine and wealthy people that you are—"

"It is all mere show, Janaki, don't be misled by the shining steel plate—the inmates have no peace of mind."

"Who is your neighbour? They seem to be big people."

"Yes, they are. The chief man is an Engineer in the municipal corporation with a thousand rupees a month—to lead these open gutters into huge conduit pipes—and there is no water in the tap to wash the dirt of your own bath room! Strange and foolish things are happening in Madras—evil and meaningless is the life in town. It looks bright and gay, that is all, like some poisonous fruit—"

"And the Engineer is a rich man!"

"Janaki, nothing comes alone in this world, luck or ill-luck. And this rich man has a richer sister who has now come down here to put her boy to school in Madras, leaving a beautiful village which she owns all for herself on the banks of the Cauvery."

She paused a moment and cried, "What a short memory I have—I think you should know her, for she hails from Alavanti, Ramu's village."

"Her name—is it Sita?"

"Yes, it is Sita—I should have mentioned her to you even yesterday if I were not so much lost in my own affairs—"

"Then I should like to see her. We were quite good friends once—"

Hardly had she spoken, when Sita with her boy crossed the verandah of her house to reach the car standing on the road.

"What! Sita in widow's weeds! Did she lose her husband? When did she!" Janaki addressed Kokilam and at the same time with a child-like voice, she called out "Sita, turn a little round this way, Sita, and tell me if you make out your old friend—"

"Is it you, Janaki!"

Sita exclaimed in a voice of pleasure tingling and richly laden with a new-born joy. Straight she cut her way to Janaki.

The car stood idly out and the chauffeur yawned, restlessly lifting his hand from the steering wheel to his mouth. More than an hour had elapsed. Sita, Janaki and Kokilam entwined into each other under the soft spell of words, like creepers in forest after a timely shower of rain. Already Sita's boy and Janaki's daughter were friends, playing and gently testing each other with the pinch that is the same for the child and the lover.

Ramu and Kedari soon joined them after their morning walk where they planned many things for their future on the lines of their moon-lit talk the previous night. Kedari's house within was the scene of crowded and confused joy.

Like water leaping over a jagged precipice in high, hill ranges, the talk flowed here and there and fell irrelevantly into a hundred beautiful cascades. None could guide the whole into a single channel. None understood the other but still spoke with joy.

But one voice was heard above the rest. It was Ramu's.

Ramu drew Janaki aside for a moment and whispered, "Dear, what a pure and lovely soul is Sita—meek, gentle and noble as ever, full of pity for the suffering world. In her widow's weeds, a purer halo encircles her being and makes her radiant and serene. She is sacred."

"Yes, my lord. She is as simple and good as ever, though she is now the queen of Alavanti."

Janaki replied in her own child-like way.

Ramu did not continue the conversation but was wrapped in thoughts of his own.

CHAPTER XLVI

THE MOUNTAIN GRASS WAS RANK AND LUSCIOUS

AT the foot of the Nagalapuram hills, just where the Arni river emerges into the plains, lay in one broad and even stretch, many acres of virgin soil. The land was beautifully attired in green shrubs decked with little flowers, white and yellow. The almost encircling hills, though low, were rich both in flora and fauna. They were wooded with every kind of vegetation, from stately timber suitable for building the finest palace to the choicest herbs that render whole the ailing body.

On the plains, the *thumba* plant grew in plenty with its tiny, lily-white, myriad flowers, bending a little to the breeze and to the bee that sucked the dew-decked drop of honey. The *tulsi* grew in plenty making a little forest of its own and emitting a holy scent. The *kumuda* shrub shed in the wildest profusion, the rich, rare and yellow fruits whose juice made the most celestial draught for wearied nerves. The *aswagandhi* plant grew modestly here and there to its richest growth, whose roots are the finest food for gods and men.

The *avaram* shrub spotted the dense green with yellow flowers whose medicinal fragrance is the friendliest sylvan gift for man.

The bees built their hives here and there, on the leafy branches of the tallest trees and the bare slopes of the steepest rocks. The Arni river chattered her way with little songs for the hills and the plains and the merry bees that hung honey-combs on her bridal course.

The mountain grass was rank and luscious. Even man envied this rich and easy food for the beast. Cows and goats roamed at large. Man had not yet built for them a prison on the most scientific lines, and called it a sanitary shed. Life was sleeky everywhere with the primeval health of nature. Man had not yet brought the blessings of civilisation, drainage pipes that drained into spring water, and tea and coffee to the hill-slopes.

Nature at the foot of the Nagalapuram hills had an intrepid and virgin look. But it did not seem a beauty, lofty and aloof, that was always meant for a lonely growth and a spinster-decay. It looked a beauty that was silhouetted with a purpose, like the inlaid bunches of a plantain flower, fresh, succulent and nourishing. The Arni river wooed and fretted along in a double voice that was just breaking into adolescence. The distant falls of water among the hills hummed like a mother calling her children for a new dainty. The birds were many and plumaged in all the

colours of the rainbow. They perched on the tallest trees, and poured forth melodious love-tunes calling for the mate, hidden in branch and bush. The flowers blossomed every morn with an expectant look, and sickened in the evening out of sheer weary watching. The smell of the honeycomb sweetened the air all around. The wind stood still with the weight of flowers. The monsoon clouds invitingly shed their precious burden but scampered away disconsolate at the thankless waste into the sea. Nature was in the eager mood of a lover, straining the eye and the ear, still and tense, like the wind caught in the rain. The God-appointed had not yet arrived. But the footfalls were already heard descending the trackless paths from Heaven.

The most momentous things go by destiny. Man has the choice to draw his time-table for tennis-play and cricket matches and to pare his fingernails in the indolent moments between two sets of the game. But the greatest things go their appointed path, like stars in the milky way.

Ramu's destiny urged him on to the foot of the Nagalapuram hills. But Ramu reflected on how may slender threads, more delicate than the lotus thread, the great scheme of which he now flattered himself the author, hung. Murugan, Meenakshi and the Monsoon floods at Alavanti flashed across his memory when he stood at the foot of the hills and on the banks of the Arni river as the sole

officer in charge of the great irrigation scheme and the new agricultural settlement.

Ramu had the entire support of the Government and he was given the fullest powers to employ men of his own choice. He set about his work with energy and devotion but with eyes rather drowned in thoughts of the universe and the future of man.

The first sod was cut by Murugan, born to the plough. The initiation ceremony was done in the orthodox style with plenty of cocoanuts, plantains and rice offered free to the fowls of the air, the beasts of the forest, and the men circling around with folded hands. The work was begun in right earnest and every one had his heart in it.

Kedari was there, abjuring for ever vakalats and affidavits, palatial houses and fine cars, ambitions and empires, and the cruel love of immortality in the field of action. He paid his debts to the last pie by selling his all, house, furniture and every thing. Kokilam gave up smilingly all her jewels, to the last screw. Kedari was a changed man. The scale had fallen from his eyes. He now did every kind of work with a new faith, from supervision to common manual labour. Ramu was with him always. The boyhood returned to them in a new way. They were one again, truer for the long breach.

Murugan still shone an old farmer with a new light in his face, like an old plough newly fixed with a share fresh from the forge. He was the

expert in agriculture for the new settlement. Thoppai ever since he saw Ramu under the torch-light, had become a changed man. He knew not why? The light of God descended into his soul in an unwary hour. He was now the commander-in-chief of the labour force peacefully employed for the construction of the dam.

The chieftain of the hill-gang was the real power who made the work and the settlement possible. He took the most energetic measures to call into active co-operation every member of his tribe even the most recalcitrant. He nobly placed at Ramu's disposal the cave treasure of the gang. It was full of silver and gold coins, old and new, and totalled three lakhs. Ramu at the sight of the treasure dreamed more and more, and widened his plans.

Sita's brother was the Engineer-in-chief for the irrigation work. He gladly exchanged his job, from laying huge drainage pipes to persuade gutters that would not flow for lack of water, to a truer and nobler work, the real work of an engineer.

And the women folk were a happier lot still. Sita was there with her brother and her boy who refused to be without Ramu's daughter for his play-mate. Janaki also persisted in Sita going over with them and watch the new work and surroundings. The change was god-like to Kokilam. She enjoyed the peace and simplicity of her new life. Ponni and Murugan's children were still at Alavanti under Sita's protection. Sita sent for

them and Murugan's old eyes were glued together with a new joy which only an aged father knows. Thoppai took a special interest in the youngest daughter of Murugan, who was now growing into lovely womanhood, the lucky daughter who was born to him on the day he became the lessee. Thoppai also thought of yet another, the Muhammadan boy, Abdulla, who made their escape from Trichy jail possible, by sacrificing himself. He had been released from jail and his whereabouts were difficult to trace. But Ramu's earnestness was equal to the occasion. He thought that the colony would not be complete without Abdulla. After several months of search, he was traced as an over-worked bus cleaner in the Kodaikanal road station, at seven rupees a month.

Now the colony was complete and happy. The matin songs of birds and men filled the air. The noon was pleasant under the shade of trees and by the side of water. Every one was blithe. Men and women worked active like squirrels. Life around was gay and cheerful. For work had the joy of recreation. Everyone worked for himself and for the pleasure of it. None slaved for another. A new impulse speeded the muscle and it knew not the fatigue of hired labour. Even the Arni river seemed to enjoy and welcome the marital girdle round her youthful loins. For in the latest floods, she brought down from the high hills to the site of the dam, hundreds of stones good and fit for masonry work, as Sita's brother testified with glee.

CHAPTER XLVII

THE VISION SPLENDID

NEARLY three years of strenuous work in sun and rain brought the irrigation scheme and the new settlement almost to a completion. Three hundred families were at work as joyous and active as birds building their nests.

Ramu enjoyed his life as much as anyone else, for he mingled freely with all and shared in every kind of labour. But now that the scheme was almost complete on the material side, his brows wrinkled a little with a patriarchal look of anxious thought. His eyes swept down the river-sand till they rested on the shimmering horizon studded with green hills and fringed with palms like sentinels on duty. Ramu was deeply impressed with the beauty of nature at the foot of the Nagalapuram hills. He longed to render this little settlement an ideal republic for all ages and climes. His ideas were slowly crystallising into shape during these three years. He now took council with Kedari.

"Well, Kedari," earnestly began Ramu, strolling on the river-sand westward with the setting

sun mildly exciting him, "our own lives and experiences should teach us something to leave behind us a better world, some symbol of our work which may help the thoughtful and the moral among the next generation. It seems to me that man needs more protection in maturity, from his own gambling instinct. What is Government for if not to protect man from his own speculating and experimenting mind, from the tricks and follies of his own curiosity and adventure?"

"My own case, dear Ramu, is an instance in point of unchecked ambition and scope for its display—what a havoc it has wrought on me and those around me!"

"Yes, look at Murugan's life. Born to slave for others, by some accident and by his own toil, he gained some wealth which would carry him day by day till his death, in peace, honour and contentment. But he was not contented or others about him were not. He became an aspiring rebel. The new flood swept away the old—and he is now dry docked on these hills. Why?"

"And what is the solution?" asked Kedari a little impatiently, for he distrusted metaphors in logical enquiries.

"Evolution is impossible, Kedari, without speculation and experiment. Friction is necessary for growth. To keep man moral and uncorrupt amidst these struggles, and thus enhance the value of his searches and seekings, society should assure him

a certain economic minimum on which he can fall back in disaster—a life-buoy in ship wreck."

Ramu almost seemed to read out a para from a scrap book under the somewhat quick cross-examination of Kedari, for he had long ago memorised these ideas and phrases as a ready reply for such questions.

"And then?" Kedari pursued.

"Life would always be a misery unless it is plainly lived. It's the greatest need of the day. Mere cultivation of the mind is no good. The man of mere mind-power is an evil. It is like a fire in the oven over which is placed no pot to boil. It's mere soot and smoke and all waste. Intellect is now worshipped as a fetish, and character and humane ideals are left into the virtuous keeping of the simple-minded as proper custodians. This exploiting attitude should change. Mind-power which has no roots in moral and humane ideals, in character and simplicity, is combustible and self-destructive. It will destroy others and itself. There must be a change—"

"Is it not, Ramu, opposed to the modern drift? I would even say the urge of evolution. Man seems to be developing only his brain-power and shedding and sacrificing every other in fashioning this chisel."

"Rather say this double-edged tool. It all depends upon how you use it. And I would only emphasise your casual figure of comparison that

brain-power is only a chisel and must be controlled and handled by a knowing power. It is not an end in itself. It cannot act for itself. The faith for work must come from elsewhere, call it character, morality, religion, God or cosmic consciousness or the Divine unknown. It is the same. This religious worship of mere mind-power, unscrupulous and destructive, in all its manifestations, must go. There must be a change of ideals if modern civilisation—"

"It would mean a radical change of work and ideals for all, of many fixed habits."

"At any rate, Kedari, for us not fixed habits or a great change, only from the raw new of the West to the very old of the East. We have taken to these new ideas of enrichment at the expense of another, in less than fifty years. Evil, like wild creepers, spreads the quickest and chokes the rarest growth of years. We must clear our colony of all weedish growth. And we should make it an abode for men like gods. Banish all strife and exploitation. Man shall never rob his fellow and enrich himself at the expense of another. Hunger and misery, we shall never know in this new place under the hills. For we want but little here and nature gives everyone the little he wants. Each works for himself and never slaves for another. If he does, he does for his own joy and not for compulsion or greed,—utter freedom for all, to move, to think, to do, and dance for ever on the river side between hills and dales—"

"But Ramu, how are you going to achieve this ideal? Man is yet so uneven—"

"Not very difficult to make a draft-scheme on paper. But I agree with you; to grow the spirit that will work the scheme and create the atmosphere for ever is more delicate than growing the *sampanki* creeper. But I am hopeful and with brave friends like you—"

"What is the scheme?"

"I give every one, male and female, child, youth, and old age, three acres of land and a garden site to build a cottage on. They go with the person for ever under all stress and strife. This inheritance shall be impartible, inalienable and descendible by primogeniture. This will assure every one a modicum of economic independence and lay the foundations for peace and culture, a life truly and nobly lived. It will eliminate the many sided struggles that range now round the problem of food. The poor will not then need the luxurious tear of pity of the rich but may live on for ever that simple life nobly which does not ask another, 'Give me my daily food. I shall slave unto you.'"

"But, Ramu, this scheme may be ideal only for a generation. What will you do when the population increases in the next?"

"I will put up another dam across another river—God's world is wide—and extend the agricultural lands. I will encourage free emigration the world over, wherever nature is bounteous and rich. For

on free emigration depends the future of man so long as he is an eating animal. National and communal patriotism might have been once a virtue in uniting small groups. But now it hinders the federation of man. A world outlook is the saddest need of the day—"

"But these are ideals, Ramu, which we no doubt feel genuinely but would sound chimerical to those in power, position and riches. For it would lead to their giving up their all. How would you leaven existing conditions? There are people who hold thousand acres and like dogs in the manger will neither work them well nor let others enjoy them but grovel idly laughing at the poor—"

"I will tax these huge holdings at a progressively higher rate till they become unprofitable for the holder to own them idly. Then natural causes will split them, till every holding reaches the immortal minimum of three acres. These three acres shall descend from father to son, from mother to daughter. None can gamble them away for they are impartible, inalienable, so long as man needs tilled food for the body."

"If a man holds more than three acres?"

"He shall pay a higher tax for such holdings. If government exists, it exists only to enforce some such moral law or *dharma* on the rich and the strong, and help the poor. That is the only cosmic sanction or good of government. The holdings shall be both partible and alienable till they reach the

immortal minimum of three acres. If you begin to-day this scheme of things, the world may not dawn a better one to-morrow but in the wake of a hundred years—a small hour in the large dial of evolution. If tens are happy to-day on the sweated toil of hundreds, thousands will then be happy in increasing numbers on their own work for their own being, with greater self-respect, and honour to the name of man."

"Ramu, an excellent ideal and a vision—it has yet a practical ring. But if one has only three acres which are inalienable, one can raise no money on credit in times of need."

"Alas! Kedari, that you too don't yet understand the drift of my mind. Credit is misery. That is the burden of my song. None shall be a lender or a borrower in my republic. If any has a little more than what he needs for the day, the week or the year—nature's produce is perishable and last no longer—he gives the surplus for the joy of it, to the neighbour who needs it."

"But, Ramu, my point is what will the republic do in famine years, without credit?"

"Famines will be rare in my scheme of things. Man will bale out water from wells—his genius for work is great—and keep alive his precious acre. But if there is one such severe one, God-inflicted, and if another tract which has yielded well, cares not to succour, for love of it, the famished one, death by starvation is welcome

and noble, as it is to a besieged soldier in the fort."

Ramu paused for a moment as if a needle had been shot into his soaring wings, and continued in a changed voice "Kedari, you underrate the genius of man. A man in need will carve a kingdom for himself, surpassing the greatest of natural obstacles, wind, weather and monsoon. Man is a great swimmer in the storm crossed sea of life. I plead only, give him a plank to keep him floating in tired moments—a three acre holding that will never sink."

"So much for lands, do you give any protection to those holding cash?" inquired Kedari, eager to change the topic and afraid to shatter the dream-world of Ramu.

"Protection for barren metal! I would give it none. It is not wealth but mere token. Cash is mortal and I would not balm it with the amber of—"

"Yes, yes, Ramu, I see the vital points of your scheme. They are good. They will go far to do away with destitution in the long course of time. Society should take some such step as yours, to relieve this burden of misery which is growing at compound rates, like a sowcar's bill."

It seemed as if the outlines of the republic would almost drop here with the elemental provision for food but Kedari revived it by a question.

"As for the education of the people—?"

"Culture, Kedari, is such a sly thing as far removed from books as flowers are from the leaves from which they spring. It is a subtle growth. The tradition, the atmosphere and the season are the real forces."

"Still one can't be unlettered."

"I quite agree. I would put up a school-building thatched with green leaves from hill sides. Teach my students in little chats and plays, outside its dumb and perspiring walls. Show them the hills and the stars, the valleys and the rivers, the honey-combs that drip with honey from tree tops, and allow them to roam at large, like wild flowers floating on the Arni river kissing every little, smiling eddy on the way. On evenings of height-ened mood for me and the boys, just fresh from the hill-climb, and on the tallest peak, I would show them the world around and deliver lectures in tiny chats. I would select with a careful eye the promising boys and make them teachers in their turn for the babes that are now turning in the cradle."

"Will you have books ?"

"Books ! what a waste they are ! Virgin forests turned to pulp, pulp thrashed to paper, paper soiled, rolled, folded and cut into books—the green leaves of the forest turned into a pale light for the blind who can't see real life. Yet, Kedari, books are the least of the inflictions on men in this man-made world. We do require them to know the thoughts of the

great till we all become great and need no books for one man to lecture and another to listen."

"I shall put you some more questions. The thing is getting warmer into my blood. Let us go the entire round and see the hill from all the sides."

"Well—"

"And for clothing—"

"One or two cotton plants here and there round your house. Spin the soft cotton into the softest yarn and weave it into cloth. In a tropical climate like ours, Kedari, I am convinced, we are being overclothed by fashion and cant for civilisation's sake, with disease running in every thread of the warp and the woof. I would cut down all clothing to a minimum."

Kedari murmured some words of assent and dissent in a vague and rambling way.

"I see your point, Kedari," Ramu spoke, "with anguish at heart. Man must buy and sell and stand at the market place a slave of himself and of others for a long, long time to come. But I plead. Shorten the days of your slavery. Cut down your dependence and wants to your lowest limits. It may be a sermon that would lead one only back to wild savagery. But I say the superman is hurling himself back in many ways only to a civilised savagery. Civilisation is now only a matter of the body and a little of the mind. Make it a matter of the spirit and the soul that are now more barbarous than of old in their essential outlook on

fellow men. Let each grow to his fullest in his own mould and soil but not like a parasite upon the flesh, harvest and labour of another. I don't want all the trees in the forest to be equal. Each has its own shaded, secluded, individual beauty. But let none live on another, extirpate another. There is room for all in this wide, free and rich world."

Ramu let himself go with emotion.

"You are right, Ramu. But will the world have patience to hear you so long or understand your point to the end."

"You asked me once a similar question. I didn't answer you then. Now I will. Kedari, we can only blow the conch, even if it be a cracked shell, and wait but meekly for the break of dawn—"

"Have you any other point about the settlement?"

"Nothing more. You know now everything Kedari. I have also discussed the whole subject with Mr. Cadell. He has agreed to make these three acre holdings in our settlement, impartible, inalienable and descendible by primogeniture from father to son, from mother to daughter. Government is the longest thing man has steadily worked for, in the painful course of evolution. Some beneficent purpose lies through all this costly adventure. It is to enforce the common good against greedy individuals. Though the hedge itself has often grazed within and destroyed the crops, Government

has now reached in all lands its acme of power. It is an *avatar* like birth for a specific good. It must act its mission and recall itself by the very act. Before it dissolves as a superfluity through individual perfection and acts of highest moral, spiritual and social good, not for a country but for the whole world, rendering every man an angel—"

"Yours are noble ideals, Ramu, I wish the world sees them as you see. But what are you going to do with yourself? You are now in the Deputy Collector's grade—"

"I will give it up to live with you and these men who have moulded me. I will beg for a three acre holding for myself from you all. I would also like that some holdings are assigned to those who have played a part in our lives and are linked with us in a way—our silent, unconscious teachers in life."

"Who are they?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Cadell, Mr. Craig and Mr. Turner—"

"May I plead for a holding for Mr. Markandam as well. He taught me the richest and the rarest lesson in the world—but for him—"

"Quite right, I agree, but will he accept one?"

"Let us offer him and see. He is not now, I hear so a bright star as once he was. Calamities, I am told, are crowding on him and teaching him a lesson even now, which I thought he would learn only in the next life."

"There are some, Kedari, in this world and there will always be some, like the floating and the joyous scum on the fresh and golden waters of the Cauvery, who will flourish on wicked deeds. Let us take no heed of them. They don't really count in the great, cosmic, universal struggle. They are mere foam. But there are very many who will return home meekly, sooner or later, and ask for bread in a repentant voice—we shall never discard them. Let us move on like the river to the sea. The salt-water is its death but is it not its love as well?"

CHAPTER XLVIII

THE RED LETTER DAY

THE weir across the Arni river was complete. The valley was submerged into a beautiful lake. A new village rose on the broad and gently sloping plains, overlooking the lake and the river. Miles of irrigation channels were cut open and the banks were planted with palms and fruit trees. The canals ran on all the four sides of the village which made a fertile square. From the middle of the four sides, two smaller channels cut each other like a cross, forming a beautiful tank in the centre. To the east of the tank, a small, handsome temple was built and consecrated.

It was a little garden city. Every cottage lay ambushed amidst the dense foliage of old trees which seemed to grow there of set purpose. Every member of the three hundred families had his or her three acre holding and a garden site with the house. Yet a few hundred acres more were available for allotment. Ramu was considering with Kedari suitable invitations for the same to people who had the best claims for the land.

The North East monsoon would soon set in in a month but the preliminary showers had already half filled the newly converted lake. Murugan thought that the opening ceremony should be done before the monsoon set in dead earnest, so that the agricultural operation might be begun in time. Ramu and Kedari agreed. Mr. H. Cadell was now the Acting Governor of Madras. His Excellency with his wife was asked to open the new settlement and the irrigation scheme.

Wide invitations were sent out and the elite of Madras were expected at the foot of the Nagalapuram hills. Special letters went out to the Rev. Mr. Craig, Mr. Turner, I.C.S., who was now retired and settled at Bangalore and Mr. Markandam Iyar. Mr. Markandam lately developed an almost spiritual desire to see Ramu of whom he had heard so much.

Everything was a splendid success and the opening ceremony made a lasting impression on the neighbourhood. The craggy hills of Nagalapuram, the strange quiet of the place, the beautiful sylvan lake and the settlement, the completely changed Kedari, and the quiescence of Ramu and the women folk around, made a deep impression on Markandam. The opening ceremony before it fertilised the fields, first spiritualised the whilom leader of the Madras Bar.

Markandam took Kedari aside by both the hands and said.

"Forgive me, Kedari, I did you a great and irrepairable wrong. Hate and jealousy, passion and greed, blinded me to the most ordinary humanities, amidst the shouts and trade calls of success. Forgive me, even that evil of mine has wrought a strange good for you. The ways of God are indeed mysterious."

"Nothing to forgive, Markandam. On the other hand, I must beseech your pardon. It was a just punishment for my own misdeeds and my ingratitude to you in trying to over-reach you. On the other hand, you were so kind to me, lifted me from my obscurity and poverty."

"Ever since, Kedari, you left me, things have not been going well with me. Hear my tales, even if they are a little longish. I have been ever since ailing in body, mind, soul and fortune. The whole thing has come back to me much earlier than I expected—a harvest of whirlwind for what I sowed in tempted hours. I lost my youngest daughter, precious thing on whom I doted in my declining years. A specialist treated her. I paid him cheerfully, I who never paid a pie till now for drugs though I have ever been ill—a specialist newly come from New York who charged me a fee in a new style at income-tax rates upon my income—but alas! without success."

"It is a pity, Markandam. She took after her mother and I thought she was the sprightliest of the lot."

"From loss of her, to loss of money is nothing in the scale of tears, Kedari. But I must tell you everything and ease my burden. The Bombay shares and speculations in rubber, jute and cotton failed, and swept away a lakh. The bank crash is responsible for another fifty thousand. These are all perhaps sorrows entombed. But I have a living misery. My eldest boy has taken to evil ways. I had no time to see to his education in the hurly-burly and incessant speed and greed of our profession. He is now a running sore."

"I warned you once about the bad company he kept."

"Yes, I remember it, Kedari, but a vakil, has he the time for home joys and affection? He is mortgaged to others. And my eldest boy has signed away promissory notes to marwaris for twenty thousand rupees at thirty-six per cent interest. But poor boy he has received not even five out of the twenty. I paid off the whole thing to avoid the lime-light of courts. The marwaris exploit me now for I have exploited many. I am sick of my life and I yearn, Kedari, for a few years of peace and rest."

"But, Markandam, these losses are but flea-bites for you. If you care, you can earn and save a lakh or two in a year?"

"Even that is not true now, Kedari. I must now at least speak the truth. When you were leaving us, you know our new Chief Justice was

just in. Even in the first week he surprised us all. He and I don't go well together and you know clients are but flocks of sheep."

"What is the matter?"

"A new order of things has come up. The trump cards are no more mine in the new play. I am too old to learn the latest shifts of fashion. The new Chief Justice is a perpetual romantic. He likes wit and humour, fineness, newness and polish, grace and elegance. Manner alone counts. Substance does not carry the day. I am old-fashioned and bred under a different tradition. I can't change. The game is up for me. What a pity a man like you is not at the bar now! Your flashes and wits, your grace and culture will leave you now where I was. Your triumph, I would feel as mine. But alas, even that is not to be!"

"I am surprised, Markandam. You are so thoroughly changed. I did not expect in three years that you—"

"Then, Kedari, keen reader that you are of men and things, pity you have not studied me keenly. I was a changed man from the day I came to know you. The leaven was secretly working within, changing my heart and mind. Excuse my frankness. You were to me a sort of mirror wherein I saw the ugliness of my own face. Your ideals and deeds were like mine—ambition and success at all cost. I saw my own wretchedness in your deeds of daring and push. How I crushed others as one

would a sugar-cane, and drank the juice with soft indifference. I felt humbled and educated within when I saw my own image in you. But I had to act my part in the play of life. So I continued to powder my face and jump on the stage. The tragic scene was nearer and earlier than you and I thought it would be. On the whole I am not sorry. Better to expiate now than wait for a troubled life in the next, causes unknown."

Kedari was dumb with astonishment and Markandam continued in a voice of pathos and final peace.

" A simple life with a day's cheerful work in the garden and the fields, is now worth to me more than all the lakhs I have made and lost. Kedari, persuade Ramu to give me a little place in his scheme. I will settle down here for ever amidst the quiet of these hills."

CHAPTER XLIX

THE RIVER SCENE AT ALAVANTI

THE Cauvery still flowed a majestic river at Alavanti. But Alavanti had lost its life. Its spirit had fled. Its grace and beauty were no more. The village was neglected and in ruins. The residential quarters, especially the Agraharam, had no more the unity of life and the atmosphere of three centuries. The running thread broke suddenly with Periaswami's collapse and the snapped string twisted itself into a knot. There were only a few, here and there, leading a scattered life. The village wore a pathetic, widowed look. And the river scene was more melancholy still. The lively bathing group had thinned to half a dozen indifferents and even they had not the old lively spirit for conversation.

"What a fate has overtaken Alavanti!" lamented the orthodox old lady with an unsullied reputation, "Fifty years ago, when I came newly wedded to this village, Alavanti teemed with life and shone with power, like a royal city. There were fifty houses in the Agraharam, and the *pallees and padayachees* were like bees in the hive. Periaswami,

though young, sat and conducted the village like a king, and none dared utter a word against him. Even till mid-night, his servants and friends thronged the streets and kept them busy. There was pomp and power. Now only jackals howl along the streets after night-fall, and we are shut in our houses like old birds in a cage, without light or food, and the master is dead."

The old lady stopped at last and the sparse listeners had not even the will to continue the lament. But one among the group, unwilling that this wail should cease from sheer ennui, said in a low tone, "When a great house goes to ruins, such is the fate. Whatever Periaswami might have been in life, cruel and profligate, he kept the village, quick and alive. Alas! That he died in civil jail, of disgrace and dishonour. It is a blot on Alavanti's fair shield. People say that he committed suicide. I don't believe it. He could not brook the shame and simply gave up life, as all sensitive souls do, without laying violent hands on their body."

"His wife and children are now penniless and without food." Uttered another who was young and rather new to the village.

"Yes, it is a pity." Continued she who talked of Periaswami sympathetically, "We all had hoped high when Sita bought Periaswami's lands, that she would do us the greatest good. But who lives in villages nowadays, who can afford town life?

To educate her boy, she left the village for Madras."

"No, no, in search of Ramu," said the middle-aged lady, now somewhat advanced in years, just joining the group—her love of spicy talk had not abated a whit. "Don't you know the latest news. Sita's brother has come here last night, and he is now on a mission—to do us all good. It appears that a new Alavanti is being created far away among hills, and Ramu is digging a lake. Sita's brother is the Engineer and he is here now, and says that Ramu is now a great man, and they are all there at the foot of a great hill making a new village."

"Has Sita's brother come here, to supervise the estate? I wish he checks the cruelty and waste of the agents. They have deprived Periaswami's wife and children of even the few *mahs* of land which Sita gave out of pity, as a free gift to them. A village without its lord goes to waste like an untenanted house. The *pallees and padayachees* have fled to Natal and Singapore, and half of Sita's lands are lying waste. While her own, old Alavanti is in ruins, why should she watch the building of a new village, far away among unknown hills and people." Uninterruptedly spoke one among the group who had finished her bath.

"But Sita's brother is on a mission," said the middle-aged lady, "that sounds too good to be true. It appears that Sita proposes to give away her

lands in charity in a new and curious way. She will reserve for herself and her son, a house and three acres each. Sita's brother is now here on that mission, to plot and survey the lands. He is already at it to-day. Every one, Brahmin, *pallee or padayachee*, male or female, boy or girl, gets three acres each, free and for ever. Those who have kept on to the village through all these difficulties will be allotted land first, and then if acres remain, those who have left the place will be called in."

"Are there any conditions attached to the gift?" enquired one who was a new comer and the wife of an agent of Sita.

"You can neither sell nor mortgage it. You should reside in the village and look after the lands or it would lapse in favour of one who is in the village but has not yet had an acre of land," said the middle-aged lady.

"It seems a beautiful and foolish dream. Will anyone in this world part with lands for fancy's sake and a name?" cried one who did not believe the words but none the less wished they were true.

"It is Ramu's dream, I am told. I have always said that if Ramu dreams, Sita too must. Both go together." Said the middle-aged lady, Kamu—we can no longer withhold the name of one who played so lively a part in the life of Alavanti.

"Then Alavanti will be once again the dear, old Alavanti."

"And the river-bath will be once again as pleasant and merry as ever. I dreamt last night a dream like this—that I found a treasure by the river-side. It can't be untrue. *Cauvery Amman* is great. But, friends, we are getting older and Time is fleeting without our knowing. We may sport in the river, and talk as lively as ever; Sita may fill Alavanti with a new and rich life. But youth will never more be hers or mine. Alas! for the good, old days of vanished pleasure, when Periaswami was the fair prince of Alavanti!" Kamu lamented, with a stolen look at her own bosom which still bore traces of a once firm and shapely outline.

CHAPTER L

MURUGAN—THE GOD-ANOINTED TILLER

THE foot of the Nagalapuram hills was gay with a new-born life, like a meadow after a spring shower. Murugan, though thrown into the back ground somewhat obscured by the cultured souls who plotted for the renaissance of the *pallees* and the *padayachees* and the dispossessed millions of the earth, was the true inspirer of Ramu from his boyhood. Ramu saw the simple world of the starving millions through the strange, hollow, rattling eyes, and the trusty and loyal soul of Murugan.

Thoppai, the rebel, mellowed in the new surroundings and at the prospect of the three acres of lands for himself, watered by a perennial stream banked in an unfailing lake. He expressed his proud soul in another way. He went about proclaiming that he was the immediate author of this beneficent scheme. Ramu nodded assent discreetly to Thoppai's proclaiming words. Because Ramu was already feeling, in spite of his moon-lit night's philosophy, that Meenakshis and Thoppais had their places, though not the

very first, in the involved scheme of things. Even courage and action tended life in their own way and contributed to the long line of causes that go to the making of good in this complex world.

The sun was setting in splendour on the Arni river. The pebbles on the sandy bed glittered like ingots of gold. The moon was peeping from the eastern sky, shy, broad and full. The twilight mingled with the moonlight. The evening darkened a little with a reluctant gloom. Soon the full moon rode on the sky, reddish and bright like a lamp of Nature hung aslant in the heavens, for the Gods' own picnic.

Below lay the finest stretch of river-sand whiter than the moon, dimpled with little pools of clear water, with fish frolicing. Lads and girls of every caste and creed were many in the settlement. They roamed at large crowding footprints on the sand, for the wind to blow over. They played hide and seek and built parrot-nests in the wet sand. The more enterprising lads and girls threw sand and twig dams across tiny threads of water in the river, and collected and diverted the flow into a new course and inundated in a friendly way, the parrot-nests of others, thought to be safe from the touch of water. The playful moods of children are many. Their creations are many. Earth, air and water yield to their pure and innocent fingers.

Ramu and Kedari were seated on the broad face of the dam newly thrown across the river.

They viewed with delight the hills, the lake and the new settlement that lay like an encampment of angels, treading the best spots of the earth for an idle hour of pleasure.

"Ramu," Kedari began, "It is a great idea that you have kneaded to shape and form—and to success. It is a monument. How are you going to name the village? I wish it goes over your name."

"No, no, Kedari, never. I am but an instrument, like the spade in Murugan's hands. But if you really think it should take the name of one who played a part, all things considered and their first causes, it must be named after Meenakshi, though she is not alive now to see the strange fruits of her vigorous mind. We shall call it Meenakshipuram."

"That is a good idea," replied Kedari, "but—"

Before he could finish the speech, a letter was placed in his hands. He tore it open. Reading it, he gave it to Ramu with delight as the first impulse.

GOVERNMENT HOUSE,
Madras,
20th October.

DEAR RAMU,

I now take the liberty of addressing you by your pet name. Your great services were just now considered by myself and my Executive Council. As a preliminary step, to satisfy some conventions, you

are now appointed as the District Collector of Tinnevelly. At the next chance, a membership in my Executive Council will be offered to you. You richly deserve this promotion for the great and good things you have done for your country and the Government. It may pain you to give up your present work and break away from such simple but manly friends. But the country requires you in higher spheres.

With my love and esteem and the greetings of my wife.

Your sincere friend,

H. CADELL.

" A letter from the Governor and what a generous offer!" exclaimed Kedari at the first flush of reading.

Ramu was silent.

" Are you going to accept it?" asked Kedari with an axious look.

" Of course not, Kedari, don't be anxious. I am not going to accept even the Viceroyalty if offered now." Ramu replied with a slight laugh. " I have settled down here with you all, now and for ever. I told you so more than once. There Sita, Kokilam, and Janaki are coming over to us. Don't tell them this news. We never know women's mind in these matters, at great turns of luck. They will clutch at pomp and power."

Sita, Kokilam and Janaki soon joined them.

"Look yonder, Ramu," Kokilam began in a free and charming voice, "at the children merry on the sands. How well, gay and vigorous they are! What a godly place you have made for us. Look at your own daughter, Ramu. She and Sita's boy are already fast friends."

Ramu gazed intently at his daughter, mild and fair like a shaft of moonlight, and the well-grown and noble-looking boy, chatting together with eager looks. Ramu turned to Sita with a kindred gleam in his eye that met a like in hers. Each felt a strange and divine comfort. Both were charmed and feasted by the sight of their disembodied souls, playing together in another flesh and form, in such a moon-lit night. Two longings blended together like dew drops in the early, soft light of morn. A touch of immortality, a sense of fulfilment and peace flooded their beings.

Janaki in her own child-like way knew it and knew it not, and broke the raptured silence of Ramu and Sita.

"Yes, dear Ramu, we have settled it long time ago, Sita and myself, that our girl should marry her boy."

Sita nodded assent. Kokilam breathed approval.

Murugan and Thoppai just then joined the group.

Kedari greeted them saying, "We are talking auspicious words of marriage. Have you any news, Muruga?"

Thoppai came forward in silence and prostrated before Ramu, "I crave Swami's leave—". He could not utter more.

"Swami, Thoppai waits for Swami's words of blessings to become my son-in-law," said Murugan.

"Thoppai, rise, none deserves Murugan's daughter more than you. God will bless you. You are the soul of our work. Rise, Thoppai."

Ramu blessed him genuinely.

The moon shone the brighter.

Ramu and Kedari were like twins. Murugan and the chieftain of the hills were together chatting of old, old things and telling tales of a vanishing world of adventure. Abdulla and Thoppai and the son of the chieftain made a complete trio.

Sita, Kokilam and Janaki lived together like the three threads of a strand. And the children of all castes and creeds knew no preferences in their joyous and innocent world but played, ran and fell together on the river sand and hill-slopes. The prattle of children's voices was everywhere like those of birds unseen in the bush. Such was the life on the banks of the Arni river, when Ramu sat watching the moon.

But the moon-lit night soon darkened a little for a passing cloud that was no bigger than a camel flung on the sky. Soon the North-East darkened a little more. It was clear that it was no passing cloud but the monsoon itself. In an hour, the wind howled along the hills. Thunder and lightning

announced the long expected birth. Miles and miles of speeding sky were covered with clouds. The first drops descended like pearls. The pearls broke into a drizzle. The drizzle marched on to a shower. The shower speeded into a storm which kept on raining for a week in all the moods of a child, from bran to hail. The monsoon had set in in full. When after a fortnight the sun shone warm and bright, as if for the first time, man and nature felt new.

In a day or two, the uplands were a little dry for the plough. Ramu gave everyone the promised gift of a ploughshare. When Murugan turned the first sod of the virgin soil in his own three acre holding, his own for ever, he felt a divine thrill of joy which only a farmer knows. Murugan became the God-anointed tiller. The plough broke well the rich virgin soil into a furrow which was reddish and cloven, like the parted lips of true love. Murugan's eyes gleamed at the sight with peace and joy for ever. He set the example for the colony and the rest of the world.

Ramu and Kedari were not idle. They were busy weeding the heavy grass and stray plants with their own hands in their own holdings. They planned a beautiful, little garden for each. They planted cuttings of *kilvai*, for the first line of hedge, and of *Bilwa* for the second line with cocoanut seedlings all around. Within, every fruit tree from mango to margosa was planted. The young

palms already waved their hands with pleasure, welcoming the new dawn of life.

Work was light as play for everyone in the settlement. For it was work for their own joy. None slaved for another. And labour was of the kind which nourished body, mind and soul. Life was simple and joyous, and man was happy on the lap of Nature, like a babe on the bosom of its mother.

Sita, Kokilam and Janaki grew together like creepers sprung from common roots. Men and women strolled in little knots. Children were merry everywhere. Murugan and the chieftain ever went together. But Murugan always stood respectfully, like a tiller of old of Alavanti, with folded hands, whenever he saw his Swami.

The village nestled on the slopes like a bird's nest in a leafy branch. The lake lay motionless amidst the hills, like a sleeping child in the cradle. The prettiest hour to see the dawn of life on the lake was early morn when the sun was peeping half above the sky-line, and the wind was gently stirring the leaves and the birds. The deep, clear water sparkled at the morning sun and smiled a little at the touch of the wind. It broke into blue ripples which playfully rolled on, dolphin-like, to the land. And the shores were covered with a carpet of green, for the mountain grass was rank and luscious. The morning sun shone in infant beauty over the wide and winding sheet of water and mirrored the

hanging rocks and trees that seemed ready to leap for a cool plunge. The hills stood green and wooded as ever. The distant fall of water called like a mother.

Ramu gazed tenderly at the whole scene,—the hills and the plains; the lake and the Arni river; the channels and the fields; the temple and the village; and the three hundred families. He saw with the prophet's eye, a little wet for the dream that materialised in his own day.

In peaceful evenings, on the water-laved and velvet-turfed shores of the lake, Sita, Kokilam and Janaki sat around Ramu in a ring of love, and stirred his rich and philosophic mind to rare depths of cosmic peace and joy. Ramu then spoke in a voice that seemed to come from beyond the hills and the falls of water.

Printed by J. R. Aria, at the Vasanta Press, Adyar, Madras.

Books by K. S. Venkataramani

Paper Boats. (Sketches of Indian Village Life.) Re. 1.

BRITISH AND AMERICAN PRESS OPINIONS

. . . They are drawn with a loving intimacy that distinguishes them from the analytical detachment of European writers . . . He has presented them in a peculiar atmosphere of his own . . . A corner of the veil which is always down is lifted and we catch a glimpse of the real household life. *Paper Boats* is a book wherewith to beguile an hour over the fire and if you are interested in India you may learn things that you did not know before.—*The Times Literary Supplement.*

In Mr. Venkataramani's work the English reader will find India presented in terms that he can understand. He is told about Hindu village life in the prose of Addison. It is like hearing the song of Deborah to a grand piano instead of a timbrel.—*The Daily Herald.*

It will give the English reader a better insight into the Hindu mind and a better appreciation of the Indian social point of view than half a dozen of the many weighty treatises by the Pundits. Mr. Venkataramani's sketches are very real and very human.—*The Review of Reviews.*

This little book of tales and sketches resolves itself into a vivid, very attractive picture of life in an Indian Village . . . The book has atmosphere. Some of the studies of rural life are very charming. Mr. Venkataramani writes a sensitive, idiomatic English and the sympathy and intimate understanding with which he interprets his people should make the reading of his book a liberal education for Englishmen who would really know India by seeing something of it through the eyes of an Indian.—*The Bookman.*

It is marked by rare charm and delicate insight and is written in quaintly felicitous English . . . Floating on their native waters, they have absorbed the delicate odours of jasmine and lotus.—*The New Pearson's*, New York.

In *Paper Boats*, Mr. K. S. Venkataramani reveals himself as an essayist who should go far. He knows his India well. I was greatly charmed by "The Hindu Temple" and "The Hindu Pilgrim".—*The Birmingham Weekly Post.*

Books by K. S. Venkataramani

On the Sand-Dune. (Musings on Life.) Re. 1.

BRITISH AND AMERICAN PRESS OPINIONS

Mr. Venkataramani's *Paper Boats* (reviewed in these columns on March 9, last), attracted considerable attention on its appearance for the distinctive native atmosphere with which he had managed to envelop his slight sketches of Hindu life. The same atmosphere is felt in this new book but instead of objective studies, the author gives his subjective moralisings on the estate of modern men, as he sits on the sand-dunes of his native place, where the Kaveri joins the sea.—*The Times Literary Supplement*.

Mr. Venkataramani is a man of refinement of sentiment, of lofty ideals, and immensely sincere. He is an artist within his *genre*, the interpretation of his own people.—*The New Pearson's*, New York.

Steadily advancing to the front rank of his generation is Mr. Venkataramani. We first knew this author from *Paper Boats*, a fine performance which earned him just praise for his command of that almost lost art the Essay. Now comes *On the Sand-Dune*.—Mr. Venkataramani muses addressing to his listener, a series of philosophical reflections each one of which is distinguished by peculiarly musical, poetical prose.—*The Daily Herald*.

K. S. Venkataramani has made a name for himself with a previous book called *Paper Boats* . . . . He is a very accomplished writer of English. *On the Sand-Dune* is a series of reflections on life, which in their hatred of industrialism as well as in the beauty of the style, recall Ruskin.—*The Glasgow Bulletin*.

Mr. K. S. Venkataramani wrote a charming book of intimate Indian essays entitled *Paper Boats*, not so very long ago. Now, *On the Sand-Dune* arrives from Madras by the same clever craftsman . . . His snatches of reflection, and aphorism and small word-pictures in poetic prose pleased me greatly.—*The Birmingham Weekly Post*.

"Modern life, its miseries and uncertainties."—*The New York Times*.